

Down the Road

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Down the Road

by [Aguagi](#)

Summary

Chapter 20: But before we reach the end, strip me down again.

Notes

The tag of "slight ooc-ness" was chosen because key events and important dynamics such as Satsuki freeing Ryuuko and admitting her likeness of her tactics to Ragyou and her foolishness for employing them for everyone to see (especially her elites, who held her in extremely high regard!) and other pivotal character development points do not happen here. For instance, Satsuki takes longer to warm up to others.

I: Where Darkness Turns into Light

Chapter Summary

Ragyo and Nui make Ryuuko one of their own and restitch her into Junketsu, rewriting her memories so that she thinks she has been raised lovingly by Ragyou all her life. She has effectively become a loyal servant of the life fibers- mind, body, and soul.

Chapter Notes

This marks the beginning of "Hajime", the first of three arcs within the story here. Each will deal with an overall theme instead of dedicating one specifically to each character (eg: one to Satsuki, one to Ryuuko, etc.).

"Insanity cannot befall one who never had sanity in the first place."

Pain on pain on pain on pain...

Ryuuko screwed her eyes shut against the physical assault, flinching at the monster of a woman's touch between her inner thighs. Her canines bit harshly into her cheeks, drawing blood easily from freshly-opened wounds. She wanted to spit it onto that dreadful woman's face, hopefully provoking her into potentially attacking her and stop whatever they were doing to her, but the elder gracefully moved out of her field of view, trailing a corpse-cold hand down the curve of her back. She settled on letting it drip down and bleed into the younger girl's layered dress - one last act of defiance in her most vulnerable moment. Her torso arched further backwards in agony and fists clenched reflexively as the white kamui snaps into place around her, digging painfully into skin as if seeking to replace her skin with its fabric. Nails cut deep into palms, drawing stark crescent impressions like painted moons against a dark backdrop as Nui's threads draw it intimately close. Her mother - no, Ragyou - gently caressed her. A mocking gesture under the guise of sincerity, Ryuuko supposed, shouting a stream of expletives when the elder's hand uncomfortably strayed too far up a thigh for her liking, the matriarch boldly tracing her fingers along very inappropriate places and very much so enjoying the sight before her.

She'd fought like a wild animal when she was caught, of course; her pride wouldn't have let her done otherwise. But the binds stringing her, holding her aloft and spread-eagle midair were too strong, too taut, too embedded within her body. Like a fly caught in an intricate spider's web, she was helpless as the two nearby put their plan into action.

"Guh...guh... kkkkk...k..."

She sputtered as the high collar around her throat unexpectedly tightened, crushing her windpipe. Breaths came heavy and labored, each gasp lined with a thousand knives stabbing the fragile throat tissue. Junketsu wrapped tightly onto every bit of her it possibly could reach, threatening to break her in half as it settled on her struggling body and savagely snapped down with its crushing bite. It undulated above her breasts, stretching and contracting as it dug into her body. Lungs burned for air and ribs audibly groaned under stress. Thigh-high boots previously tailored for Satsuki's toned legs tightened uncomfortably against hers, the band of fitted material contracting painfully.

Ryuuko shuddered. Senketsu felt natural to wear and felt no different than any other clothing she wore; Junketsu was cold and inhuman - steel on ice, perhaps. The way the thing *crawled* across her body made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. It gave the distinct impression of an insect skittering along her skin, a roach that she couldn't crush out of existence.

"Get... it... off..." she hoarsely cried, writhing futilely against the threads which paralyzed her midair once more. "Get it off!"

Amused, Ragyou chuckled, a low sultry laugh tainted by inhuman vocal chords, and playfully let pale lissome fingers dance on her chimeric daughter's neck, letting them linger for a second before drawing them upward to cup a blushing cheek.

"Don't fight," she cooed in her ear, tone breathy and reassuring. "Open your heart to Junketsu."

Nui moved beside her, humming an indistinct tune as she fingered a lengthy, slender needle adorned with a similarly long red thread. Uncomfortably close as she was, the cyclops drew closer even more, shoving her crown between her self-described soul sister's head and shoulder and letting her warm breath draw reddening patterns on her *dear Ryuuko's* skin. An errant flick of her fingers, and the delinquent's pained howls began anew.

Nui skillfully sewed her older sister into the outfit, tutting mock-condescendingly as calloused fingers pleadingly grasped at pink gauntlet-clad wrists to stop. Did it bother her to literally bind human and clothing together in such a glorious marriage between the two organisms? *Certainly not.* Ryuuko needed to see the truth, and although her heart panged at the sight, Ryuuko would certainly thank her later.

She giggled. As *if* her alien heart could feel remorse for what she did.

She did whatever she wanted, and nothing would stop her, after all. Soon, Ryuuko would be at her *maman's* side, where she should have always been from the very beginning.

Ryuuko felt the kamui's distinctive drain on her body as it feasted on her blood, practically lapping at the droplets as the blonde's needle pierced through its layering and fibers invaded and anchored into its new host's flesh. Droplets of red were devoured as quickly as they appeared, leaving the god robe white as freshly fallen snow once more. A python ensnaring a mouse, the sailor uniform became a fraction tighter, as if it were trying to squeeze every last drop of blood out of her body. Junketsu mercilessly siphoned the iron-rich liquid before the previous withdrawal was absorbed into its fibers, feeding off its new host as she continued to squirm and struggle within her bindings.

She became aware that she was gradually losing feeling of her limbs, the curious sensation of pins and needles replacing it in its stead. Unbidden, they shook, violently quaking where they were pinned. A deep panic spread from the chimera's core to the rest of her body, acutely seizing her mind and whipping it into a frothing frenzy matched by frantic, reinvigorated attempts at escape. Thoughts raced, incoherent and unfinished sentences brought to her awareness before being overtaken by others, like bubbles in a pot of boiling miso. Anxiety struck, placing a deadened weight over her chest that seemed to choke, to *suffocate*. Her alien heart throbbed, beats skipping, coming in rapid and shallow.

In and out, in and out the needle weaved. The metal ran red with her blood with its entrance and was cleaned upon exiting by hungry cloth.

The no-star's eye twitched.

In and out. In and out and in and out and-.

"Stop..."

When did she become so pathetic?

In and out. In and out...

She can't think... Something's wrong inside her head. There's a gnawing deep inside her brain, a twitch in her muscles, a feral feeling hard to describe that's poking at the edges...

This was just like when she fought Nui for the first time.

"Stop... "

Only this time, there was nobody to save her.

"Stop... it..."

...and in and out and in and...

The delinquent no longer cared to maintain any semblance of dignity as whimpered words tore free from blood coated lips. Pressure built behind her eyes as tears started to gather, uncomfortable aches and pains from Junketsu's feeding and Ragyou's perverse ministrations too much to bear.

"Stop it!"

A bright flash obscured her vision, and when it disappeared, everything vanished.

Her body temporarily seizes at the sudden over-stimulation, hips bucking into empty air as a pleasurable rush hits deep in her core. When it fades to a comfortable afterglow, the seventeen year old then realized she was floating, her body free of both pain and markings she obtained while enduring damage from uncountable, easily forgettable battles. She relaxes, bliss taking over her senses. Far away from the earthly troubles of the mortal realm, the recent memory of her assault slips past her mind, of the battle of wills going on without her knowledge at the moment. An unbordered expanse of pure white lay before her, the space intermingling with unfathomably long strands of life fibers that bobbed and twisted as if they had a consciousness of their own. Nothing else existed in the void yet, not even sound.

The noisy chatter in her brain precipitously stopped, leaving her mind curiously blank. It felt difficult to conjure images or think of anything. Occasionally, something would flit before her eyes, but they were too muddy and obscured to divine an answer more complex than what she saw from them. A brown-haired girl with an atrocious bowl-cut laughing at something. An abnormal red blade meeting its twin- long-separated Geminis? Something leaping out at her like a lion going in for the kill. A girl with hair as long and free as the wind's unearthly caress. An imposing building with a dead man clothed in nothing but shadows bound between two towering pillars- a Samson from another time? A wreck of a house. And fire. So much fire. A rapid series of stills assaulted her, each burning themselves into her mind, searing into her memory one right after the other. In time, they mixed together unhappily, forming a monstrous conglomeration of snapshots that painted a surreal, terrifying picture of her past.

For the first time in her life, Ryuuko was terrified beyond measure.

The silence was deafening. No movement she made procured any noise. Her heartbeat, usually relentlessly pounding in her ears, was absent. When she opened her mouth to shout, the expanse snatched them from her, placing an ethereal kiss on her lips in its wake.

Unbidden, a memory flashed before her eyes, and its pull snatched her away before she could resist. The void disappeared, and with it, the last remaining vestiges of herself as she was.

"You're getting to be a big girl now, Ryuuko," a man in a lab coat gruffly muttered as he adjusted the toddler's clothes and discarded the spent syringe. "You have to wipe your own tears now."

Ryuuko looked up at the man with unshed tears in her eyes, rubbing at her hurting arm than following her father's advice. It smarted sharply from where the clear liquid was introduced into her system. In her other tiny hand was Kiyoshi-chan, her faithful stuffed pig, worn from years of love and indeterminable hours of play. It used to belong to someone else that Isshin loved, someone with a blue bow in her hair most days and an elaborately constructed ribbon the other days. The aforementioned stuffed animal seemed to mournfully glare at the doctor; its cloth eye silently watching all and passing judgement.

Suddenly overcome with guilt, Isshin took one of the girl's small hands and kissed the back of it. It was short but tender, only slightly marred by the remarkable beard.

"I'm sorry, Ryuuko, but it's for your own good."

"But why, dad?" The first tear fell. The second soon met its twin on sun-kissed lips.

Isshin flinched. 'Dad,' she said. Not 'daddy', like she usually would.

"I want to protect you, Ryuuko. From all things that want to hurt you, both inside and outside."

"Inside?" the toddler puzzled, placing her hand and Kiyoshi-chan over her heart for emphasis.

Isshin grimly smiled. "You'll understand when you're older. But I hope you never have to. Not now, not ever. But regardless of what happens, promise you'll never forget me. Never forget-!"

"Forget? Why would I forget...?"

The scene changed unexpectedly, as if someone had ripped a running film reel out of a projector and hastily fed in a new one. Unlike the harsh sepia tones of the previous memory, the area took on a subdued grayed tone.

Ryuuko paused, wracking her brain.

Previous memory? Already, she was starting to forget.

She tried to remember, to recall any scant details, but all her mental search rewarded her with was *"It's for your own good."*

"It's... for my own... good?" she quizzically repeated. "It's... for my own good... It's for my own good."

"Yes," a quiet, coy voice seemed to seductively whisper into her ear. "Indeed, it's for your own good, and the good of the world before you. Relax, and let yourself be cleansed of the world's filth. Relax, and let yourself be... *purified*..."

Her mind buzzed, tickled at the breathy contact. Euphoric jolts ran down her spine, each more intense and toe-curlingly pleasurable than the last. Decision hastily made against her nature, Ryuuko decided not to question it, not when it was doing *that*.

But a different part of her mind rebelled, refused to be subjugated. A fire burning from deep within, it roared at the very notion of submission, of willingly handing herself over without just cause. It clashed horribly with the ghostly entity, intent on forcing it out or die trying in the process. And it *hurt*. She whimpered as agony unbridled clawed at her in response. She tried to tell herself that she wanted this, that she *needed* this. But it didn't listen, didn't relapse, and the pain of a thousand speeding trains slammed into her again and again.

In due time, a baby swaddled in white cloth soon appeared before her in her mind's eye, forcing attention away from her own suffering. Nothing but a beaming smile and a tiny bang of impossibly colored hair poked out of nested cotton, the picturesque serenity the infant possessed soothing her nerves.

The bundle morphed into a shy, young toddler donned in rain boots, a fisherman's hat, and a short dress, looking towards something Ryuuko couldn't see. She seemed to give her a knowing smile, unadulterated joy twinkling in her youthful eyes. Then the toddler became a young adventurous girl scaling the tops of trees with her mother's awed approval, a five year-old exploring shops as part of a mother-daughter day out, a wishful girl blowing out candles for her sixth birthday, varying degrees of a schoolgirl going through the motions of first days and graduating, then a young teen interning at the Kiryuuin conglomerate, until finally...

The world neatly ground to a halt. Her acuity sharpened greatly as the turbulent motions of the memories calmed. A church stood before her, small and tranquil. Bells rang in the near distance- and when she peered up to look at them, the sight before her took her breath away.

Before her was a duplicate of herself dressed in a delicately exquisite wedding dress standing beside a tuxedo-clad figure facing an altar. It fit her body perfectly, as if tailored by nothing less than expert hands.

The bells tolled again, and suddenly she was that Ryuuko, gazing at her groom lovingly. It felt perfect, as if she knew her exact place in the universe and everything made sense. The feeling inside... it was purely impossible to accurately describe how awesome and weightless it felt. Her head still hurt, but it had dulled considerably as a delightful buzz took over in its stead.

"Yes! That is your happiness- the good fortune of being worn by clothing!" a different voice appeared, and she turned to see her mother below her, gloriously immaculate in appearance.

The pain disappeared instantly.

Indeed, the glory of the god robe now luxuriously swathed upon her body bathed her form in its wondrous afterglow. No longer tight and crushing around her midsection, it undulated freely, rippling pleasantly above her flesh and sending jolts of mind-numbing pleasure down her entire being. Ragged lips parted to allow a throaty moan past, and with one final breathy sigh, she allowed herself to relax completely and let this new sensation wash over her, mind finally freely submitting to its presence.

Ryuuko remembered now! She remembered that everything shown before her was what she had forgotten- the perfect childhood she shared with her mother that millions of people would kill for, the endless sea of love and understanding her mother had provided her with, and the role she had in spreading the love she felt now to the less fortunate. And it was only thanks to that traitorous *backstabbing* "sister" of hers that she had forgotten in the first place!

"You understand, don't you, Ryuuko?"

She was a monster. Bestial in nature, even. An inhuman freak in human clothing. The result of an experiment combining two species in the misguided belief of fostering intimate relations between them in the name of the betterment of mankind. But her mother loved her anyway and gave her a normal life, taught her that what she was wasn't evil or something to be reviled and ostracized for. Her mother was her rock in the sea of turmoil, a path to green pastures in the wasteland of the world. She would do anything for her, and her mother would do the same.

Ryuuko understood perfectly.

"Yes mother," she cried as she dove off of the building, casting aside all inhibitions and entrusting her safety to the paragon of truth and love. But even in the land of bliss, a flash of sepia flitted between her vision, and the delinquent was graced with a brief head-splittingly painful headache once again.

"-Promise you'll never forget me!"

She gasped. The connection severed, and the white void returned with a vengeance, blending unpleasantly with elements from the real world.

"-Never forget-!"

The final echo wracked her body. Limbs seized dangerously before the energy spike abruptly left and she relaxed. Her tired body overcome with exertion, collapsed into four waiting arms, where she was held gently, lovingly almost.

"I won't forget you... mother..." she whimpered, going limp in the hands of her former captors turned rescuers.

The tears she held in for so long finally fell.

Your Little Nightmare

Chapter Summary

A wild Ryuuko attacks the Naked Sol!

Chapter Notes

A big thank you is in order to White Okami for beta-reading a very early draft of this chapter, Vagabond for commenting, h0saki for the promo, and everyone that left kudos!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"It is easier to strike down many birds with one stone than it is to strike down a ship with a sword. But you're going to try anyway, aren't you?"

"A true Kiryuuin," Ragyou breathed, marveling at her handiwork. True to the Grand Couturier's words, the refitted kamui had fit Ryuuko perfectly.

Magnificent.

A hand snaked onto the younger's thighs and under the ruched material, finding the taut muscles rippling under the thigh-high boots pleasing to the touch. Ryuuko twitched, movements sluggish and restricted by the anchor points embedded within her skin. An involuntary shiver ran down her spine, rattled through her bones, and came back up as a choked whimper between chattering teeth. The hand lifted, and soothingly patted the halfling's hair, toying with the bright red bangs that hid underneath the messy mop.

Then, gear-pupil'd irises dilated pleasingly before shrinking once more, and the minor resistance ceased. Ragyou smirked and leaned in close, a slender finger brushing away falling tears and breath tickling the other's ear as she started weaving a false childhood, imprinting her values within the fake memories and burying the true memories underneath. Poor girl. She had lost her way, with her fool of an ex-husband misleading both of his daughters with a metaphorical carrot and laughable human values. It really was a good thing her mother came

to... correct such an injustice. Mind stitching with one thread was too weak for the extraordinary daughter, so she, Ragyou Kiryuuin, had taken the liberty of tying her down with many threads like a giant among ordinary men. And now, the glorious irrefutable truth was bared. All that mattered was how it would be presented.

Ryuuko blankly stared at the two, seeing and yet not quite doing so through glazed, unfocused eyes. Something distantly raging in the back of her mind told her to fight, to resist, to rip these threads out of her skin even if it killed her and maul these two *monsters* with her bare hands until they were nothing but bloody shreds... ..but strangely enough, she couldn't bring herself to do so. Indeed, the longer she stared at them, the weaker these feelings grew, anger replaced by joy and contentment and remnants of a hateful snarl becoming undone as forged memories encouraged her to accept them, to eagerly welcome them.

The corner of her mouth twitched.

Mother...? Nui...?

Thin lines curved. Chapped lips were galvanized into action, despairing frown jerkily bending into an open-mouthed grin even as tears continued to stream over hot cheeks. Her heart quieted in its frantic beating, comforting warmth spreading throughout her body as it rejoiced at the sight of them.

"You understand, don't you?" Ragyou cooed soothingly, wicked smile widening even more upon a tiny, hoarsely whispered "yes".

'What an oddly similar situation,' she mused. A mother and a daughter. Naked and yet clothed at the same time. A question of understanding, and an affirmation. *'Except,'* she mulled, lightly tracing a hand down the younger's middle and feeling her shudder the slightest bit in concealed excitement, *'without pretense and posturing.'*

Her captive was deathly still, the point of submission long passed. With an errant flick of a hand, the tethers loosed themselves from their target's skin and let her hang there by their master's hand. Ragyou settled both of them down atop a mesh-like building, allowing Nui to sandwich the older sister between them while the stitching completed its work. Junketsu still squirmed underneath their flesh, undoubtedly still busying itself with the task of bonding with its new host. But its fidgeting soon ceased, and a light blue glow emitting from the cobalt trim confirmed its absolute integration.

"People... exist for the sake of clothing," came a muted voice after a lengthy silence, much to the elder's glee.

"Indeed," Ragyou nodded, errant strands of impossibly shaped hair lightly fanning the younger's face. "The very beings that stand at the apex of life on this planet. That's what life fibers are."

Ryuuko deferentially allowed the two's touches against her, even leaning into them. Absentmindedly, her fingers brushed against herself, hands feeling the luxurious cloth above her. *This feeling... Junketsu... was this how life fibers and humans were meant to be*

connected? In due time, her ministrations led her limbs to contact with three metal bits, reveling in its design before toying with the epaulette above.

Nui took notice. Gently, she guided them back, unnaturally soft fingers curled around torn and calloused ones. "Show us, Ryuuko. Show us how you look in your very best," the blonde whispered.

The fingers pressed them in. Three clicks signified three needles being locked into place, and Ryuuko exploded in a brilliant flash of blue, azure tracer lights twinkling above.

Power. So much power...

Pleasure rolled off of Junketsu in waves, threatening to catch the remaining bits of consciousness in its undertow. Thoughts raced, leaving many uncompleted before swiftly moving to another. Ryuuko's body trembled, barely noticeable under the activated kamui's protection. Everything was bright - too bright! The world was saturated in sound and color, turning even a placid blue sky bizarrely filled with buzzing, lines, and light - how tragic it was to see all, and yet nothing at once! A raw, primal hunger filled her at the sight; it was driving her mad. Her eyes rolled in their sockets, a twinge of pain accompanying every movement. She needed an anchor point to hold on to... something to focus on.

"My lady, Satsuki has escaped," Rei's voice faintly wormed its way into her head, temporarily breaking the madness's hold.

Satsuki...

The world suddenly gained clarity. Definition. Sanity. An old foe, it seemed, would do the trick just fine - the pursuit an obsession in and of itself. Ouroboros. A sick kind of rapture twisted into her gut and bubbled upward, where it kissed her heart and locked it in a frenetic embrace. Her mind spun, nerves aflame with barely-restrained impulses. The next two words barely registered to her ears; they sounded so loud, and yet so far away at the same time.

"Satsuki did?"

Ragyou turned and fixed her brainwashed daughter with a knowing smile.

"I'll leave her to you"

She would have laughed, then, hadn't her hand - her traitorous hand! - reached out and fisted the smaller girl's clothing. Ignoring her shocked cry to pull her forward in a forceful kiss, the life fiber creature's question was silenced immediately. Ryuuko quietly mulled. She said something about her father? She wasn't sure anymore, except for the undeniable fact that he was *dead* and that *Satsuki* was the one who did it. *She* was the one who condemned her father to rot in a jail cell underneath the school and killed him when he provided no useful information, after all.

Satsuki. Darling older sister and literal backstabber. Former apple of mother's eye. A would-be murderer blinded by her path in following her selfish desires. Her anger increased at the

very thought, bubbling underneath her skin and heating her blood. Rage threatened to boil over, a disastrous possibility in the making. Certainly, Ryuuko didn't want to harm her much nicer little sister or her mother, who had given her everything her heart desired.

So she channeled the superfluous energy into the intimate moment. Hate and love met. Two opposite sides of the coin, Geminis created by a cruel twist of fate, pressed forward until both could feel the others pulse through their skin. Electricity rippled between them, hearts skipping as it raced through pounding muscle. Like and yet unlike, they similarly attracted and repulsed one another until the very air visibly crackled between them, the pressure becoming too great for either to bear. Ryuuko responded then, by doing what anyone in her situation would have done - shove her away and blast off in an explosive blaze of fading blue light into the heavens, far away from anything and everyone.

She didn't need to change forms to fly unlike with that old patchwork garb she used to hang around and fight in. No, this was true power - Life Fiber Override. Instead of wasting time on debacles and compromises, she used her body as an offering to the kamui in exchange for its full unbridled power. As foretold by the one woman she loved most in the world, it offered nothing but that to her and her alone. Almost selfishly, Ryuuko wondered why everyone else simply didn't cede to the life fibers' call if it meant great power - it would make everything so much easier.

The blade in her hand felt strange. She had swooped low over the courtyard to retrieve it, artfully reveling in a *real* kamui's power and ease of maneuverability in exaggerated displays of twisted loops and barrel rolls. An instrument made of dead life fibers built to kill other life fibers, wielded by a human fused by life fibers heeding the will of life fibers? Life was strange. But Ryuuko surmised that she could apply the same thought to herself now that the truth was revealed, and took off.

...before coming face to face with the soulless husk of a COVER. The chimera backed off slightly, staring at the hovering suit. It stared back, the withered head of the human trapped within ghoulishly gazing upon her with shrunken eyes. Finally, it seemed to snap out of a trance and follow an unspoken command, silently moving out of the way and even bowing slightly before leaving her presence.

She pulled up, Honnouji Academy and the dilapidated city underneath becoming nothing more than a speck in the distance. Such a shame that Satsuki had put more thought into her rebellion than she did for the common good. And speaking of her dear older sister, it was well past time for a playdate. Satsuki must have been *dying* for some company after all this time after all, and who better to greet her than her long-lost little sister?

But how, how would she track her? Flying far above the institution held no purchase, nor did her sharpened eyesight detect anything. Ears strained against the buffeting wind currents during the nth widening circle around the academy. Impatience soon caught up to her, agitation in being unable to find what was here mere minutes ago making her tense irritably. Her ears soon twitched, finally catching the whirring buzz of a helicopter flying away.

A cat-like grin spread across her lips as she rode on heated wind currents to her destination.

Oh. Yes.

“Projectile inbound at excessive speeds!” Houka shouted, desperately looking up from the impromptu control panel that the raised dais supported.

“What!?”

The several cries of surprise were cut short as a *flaming* blue bolt fell from the sky and impacted the deck solidly, leaving a wide crater of destruction in its wake. The boat groaned under the strain, flopping about the churning waves dangerously. Satsuki ground her heels into the steel, frowning as her worst fears came true. The figure at the epicenter of the deformation looked up at the terrified group of people above her, mockingly giving a half-wave with her free hand. From the inner deck, peering out a porthole, Senketsu’s eye widened visibly. That looked suspiciously like -

“I’m going to destroy it all! Every last thing!”

Ryuuko.

Tsumugu wasted no time in attacking the chimera, sliding down the ramp into the custom-made DTR. Peppering her with modified life fiber-jamming needles, he closed in on the distance between them, hoping to drive her away at the very least. Ryuuko lazily dug her blade into the flooring beneath her and balanced against it, leisurely kicking her heels up. Amused, she stood there and took the assault, cleaning the spaces between sharpened teeth with an expertly caught needle as his futile assault continued. Humans were such weird creatures.

From her perch, Satsuki could see everything. From the reports of her loyal devas, she knew exactly how useless Nudist Beach’s weapons were against an activated god robe, even when battling a Ryuuko light years away from achieving true life fiber synchronization with her kamui. Now clad and consumed wholly by Junketsu, they might as well be shooting her with marshmallows. Only one thing could help her now.

Senketsu.

She allowed herself to momentarily smile, if not internally. Strange bedfellows, indeed. Hate her as it may, Senketsu was key to their victory, and Satsuki would ensure they would succeed. Snatching life from the jaws of death, perhaps. Her blue eyes sharpened with resolve and her legs moved, bringing her ever closer to her goal.

“Lady Satsuki!”

She paused, turning her head to face her faithful companions as they proffered their respective halves of Bakuzan to her, dipping their heads in utmost reverence.

“They’re better off in your hands than ours.”

Satsuki nodded, gently taking the sheathed blades with her. Though she descended rapidly to the inner decks, her stride was purposeful, regal even. She had to hurry. Tsumugu wasn’t going to last much longer even if Ryuuko decided to further humor the Nudist Beach

operative. From inside, she heard muffled voices. She stopped in front of the door where they were concentrated.

“I’m coming in,” she announced, although it was more of a formality than anything else.

Stepping past the threshold, she locked eyes with the black and red kamui, ignoring the fact that three-quarters of the Mankanshoku family had their heads stuck in the portholes and were flailing about humorously. A mutual thread of understanding passed between them in that moment, and it hopped towards her, fabric lightly dusting the floor. Satsuki extended a hand, and the kamui leapt towards her, albeit visibly less enthusiastically at it would with its proper owner. Flesh and fabric connected and melded in one point of singularity.

Snatching life from the jaws of death, indeed.

Ryuuko cocked her head, feigning interest even as the shooter realized the prolonged barrage had no effect on the kamui and started a slow retreat whilst maintaining fire. Then, with a powerful swing of her sword, the DTR was blown away and pushed into the observatory tower with a powerful gust attack. Tsumugu gasped as the weight of the machine pressed harshly against his body and acute pain flared in his chest. He swore. At least one rib was bruised, if not cracked already from the strain. He considered himself extremely lucky it wasn’t anything worse.

“Oh, look. It’s a guy with a mohawk riding a mech that exposes his ass to the entire world.” Ryuuko sneered, hefting her blade and positively salivating at the thought of smearing his insides all over the freshly-polished deck. “Just die already.”

A harsh glare caught her peripheral vision. Bright yellow beams fanned from a figure slowly being raised to the deck by cargo elevator. Easy kill forgotten, the chimera craned her neck slightly in interest, a muted grin seizing hold of her facial muscles as its owner recognized the identity of both objects.

*Satsuki. **Senketsu.*** Her lip subtly curled in disgust. Traitors, the both of them, to the world and everything mother stood for.

“Oh,” she mused aloud, fully turning and letting the blunt edge of the scissor blade rest against her shoulder blades. “So that’s your game! I get it. The two of you joined hands, eh?”

The sword slid down, one hand securely fastened around the grip in preparation for attack. A tongue ran over molars, flicking against them in consideration. Satsuki said nothing. How weird it was to be the one looking up at a powerful adversary instead of gazing down upon them, as per norm! But Satsuki Kiryuuin neither dithered on the present nor wallowed in the past.

“Let’s do this, Senketsu!”

The god robe assented, and with a calculated flick of the short blade, the activator pin was triggered and warm power flowed through her. Wearing Senketsu was far more comfortable than Junketsu by kilometers - with the same goal in mind, the disparities between human and

clothing grew few and far in between and the strain of wearing the kamui paled in comparison. Satsuki secretly was appreciative; not having to waste energy on a pointless mental battle of wills ensured complete focus. If only they could re-tailor - .

“Mother was disappointed that you weren’t able to join us for the family reunion. But I suppose you felt too embarrassed to come in with *that*,” Ryuuko laughed derisively, rocking on her heels and interrupting whatever train of thought the other had. “She invited you to come over today. We even had a *surprise* for you.”

“You are a fool.” Satsuki replied coolly. “Do you think she cares little for anything besides her goal of life fiber domination? She pretends she cares for you, understand you even, but you are nothing to her besides a plaything, something to toy around with in the meantime while her pet project is unachievable at the moment.”

In an instant, the air around them changed, became charged with a tense electric current. Ryuuko purposely shifted her weight on the unstable platform, heels harshly clacking against steel. Forget capturing Satsuki- bringing her her severed head as an offering would just as well.

“Tch,” the aggravated answer came. The slab started to fall forward, and Ryuuko shifted her weight, using the rapidly increasing momentum to launch herself at her older sister. “Let’s do this, Satsuki!”

A show of brilliant force rocked the ship. Inside the maelstrom of clashing swords, a bubble encircled the two fighters, quickly expanding outward in a shockwave rivaling Ryuuko’s half-expected entrance onto the ship. Red locked against black. Neither triumphed, however. Instead, both met in a show of calculated force as both owners tested the other's strength.

"That's Bakuzan, huh?" Ryuuko sneered, eyeing the two halves with a dismissive sneer. "Geez, talk about being clingy. Can't let go of something mother smashed?"

Satsuki frowned, pushing back. She just had to buy a few minutes at the very least. No use holding back against someone that was unable to.

"It's not clinginess, it's vengeance! As long as one piece remains, the whole can be reconstituted. As it is unbroken, so shall the blade of my heart!"

For this, she was rewarded with a brutal blow to the abdomen with the scissor blade’s dull half. Ryuuko bore down, stabbing again and again with a fever. She scoffed. Such bullshit. She had expected more from one who squandered thirteen years of her life planning a failed rebellion.

Scissor half and twin Bakuzan met again and again, leaving a trail of rent metal and wrought destruction in their wake. They broke away with explosive force. Improvising, Satsuki bounced off a protruding metal sheet and leapt like a lioness springing for the kill, but was knocked away with a brutal kick that sent her flying. Ryuuko, for her part, zeroed in on her blindside. Devastating blows brought Satsuki to her knees, but the president soon recovered. The elder barely managed to roll out of the way before the red blade crashed down where her torso was just milliseconds before.

“Senketsu Shippu!”

The kamui responded to her demands, albeit slower than she would have liked. Still, it was doing much better than expected, seeing as neither of them were synchronized with each other in the slightest. Satsuki widened the distance between her and her sister, choosing to disorient her opponent by flying in seemingly haphazard patterns. The tactical advantage of an aerial attack soon opened and Senketsu soon closed the distance in record time, its wearer managing to mete a stiff uppercut to her opponent.

“You fucking bitch!”

“I haven’t even started yet!” Satsuki declared confidently, steering the kamui around for another pass. “Senjin Shippu!”

Ryuuko merely quirked a brow as the kamui changed form again. How inventive. Less amusing was the fact that Satsuki had managed to find new uses for the sailor fuku and concentrate the kamui’s power into an energy attack. The chimera barely had enough time to raise her blade before the disk of energy connected with it, forcing both blade and wielder into the ship itself. Metal tore itself away from underneath in curled sheets, twisted steel reaching toward the skies. A strained cry pierced the rapidly misting air as the purple disk connected with its target.

Satsuki touched down, cautious. The transformation of her lower half back into a functional pair of legs cleared the smoke in the immediate area, but the locus of impact was too obscured. Still, she waited patiently. Satsuki Kiryuuin never presumed a complete victory without a body lying before her. A tongue hastily wet dry lips.

Yield... yield...!

Silence answered her. She knew Ryuuko would never go down this easily, but perhaps her inexperience with handling Junketsu would have destabilized her?

Nonsense, the rational part of her scolded. *It’s Ryuuko we’re talking about - the girl who literally learns new tactics as she fights... and wins.*

But still, she fervently hoped.

But when the dark smog cleared, her hopes were quashed. Calmly sitting on jutting metal, Ryuuko malevolently glared at the duo, spitting a wad of blood to the side.

“Huh. So you’re not *entirely* useless after all.”

Shocked, Satsuki reacted by backing up, although it wasn’t fast enough to stop a roundhouse from being cracked against her side as the younger moved at an impossibly fast speed. A hand barely managed to stop a fore-knuckle strike from connecting with her temple, an arm failing to stop a forceful knee-smash from digging into her abdomen. Again and again the chimera struck the many open spots Satsuki had left, brutalizing her so eerily alike how Ragyou did during the post-raid trip celebration. The elder coughed, blood spraying the other

in the face. Wincing in pain, she could only endure the savage beatdown, barely managing to escape when the first opportunity presented itself.

Ryuuko licked her lips in anticipation. Satsuki's connection with the dishrag was tenuous at best. The fact that she couldn't dominate the battle quickly proved it. She could easily take big sis down and kill two birds with one stone. '*Or...*' She dared to waste a split-second glance elsewhere, '*many birds with one strike*'.

Satsuki, for her part, remained guarded. Ryuuko was pulling her punches, and it wasn't just for analytical testing purposes as their battle earlier proved. If she really wanted her dead, she would have used her sword to finish the job in place of her fists. She was actively planning something - something that Satsuki silently resolved would never come to fruition.

Unfortunately for her, however, the slightly less focused look on her face gave her opponent the much needed time to slip in a rushed stomach jab with her free hand. Stunned, the student council President recovered just in time for a sloppy haymaker to connect, then a right hook. To her credit, however, the close combat gave her the entirety of possibilities with Ryuuko's open torso and legs- something her blades took advantage of.

Blood splashed across her vision, the torn wounds seeping down the thick band of material that lay on the other's abdomen. Cuts, she had hoped, that would stun rather than filet her little sister- A hope that was rapidly dashed when the pummeling increased in brutality.

"**Bitch,**" she heard the red-streaked teen hiss right before the wind was knocked out of her once again.

The elder cried in agony as Ryuuko's free hand twisted her arm painfully. White hot pain shot up and down her arm. She feared it dislocated, and although she suppressed the violent shudder that ran through her, she was sure the younger saw it. The hand was upon her once more, and suddenly, she found herself swept off her feet rather harshly and thrown a little ways away into the cornucopia of jutting metal.

A lesser man would have died, she surmised, struggling to free herself from steel I-beams that held her captive.

Regaining her bearings, she noted only the tantō in her relative position. The wakizashi twin was nowhere to be found. Satsuki panicked. The blade, so lovingly protected by her Elite Four, was missing. She could only hope it wasn't shattered *again*.

Where was it, where was - ?

A familiar gleam caught her eye.

Oh. Shit.

"Never knew you to be the sentimental type, sis." Ryuuko drawled, fingering Bakuzan Kouryuu and running a tongue over its bloodied flat. Satsuki stayed silent, recalculating her next move and weighing the odds that Ryuuko would simply destroy it. "The reformed pieces

of your resolve, huh? Such a shame." Her face split open into a wide grin. "I think I'll keep it. A memento perhaps, of my dear, departed sister."

‘Departed?’

"Tell you what. If you do manage to survive, I'll bring your body to mother as a present. Think of it as a belated homecoming gift."

Crack!

The brainwashed girl punched through the solid steel deck of the ship with a single blow, disappearing into its inner decks with ease. Satsuki swore quietly as the ship rocked unhappily. Quickly recalculating, she dug herself out with her better arm and followed after, lagging slightly only due to pain.

Try as she might to keep up, the pristine white cloth of her former kamui soon disappeared into the enormous depths. The air around her turned oppressive, as if sensing the growing seed of despair within her. Quietly resigned, she massaged her wounded appendage, ears straining against the noise of her own clumsy steps to detect her sister's whereabouts. The sporadic cries of terror and agony certainly didn't help her nerves at all. As time passed and the footsteps grew quieter, she sped up her self-examination and ascertained that it was nothing serious.

Senketsu barely tightened over her body, its singular eye staring up at her unblinkingly. Unconscious of the fact, Satsuki reached over and lightly patted the crest reassuringly before withdrawing her hand, suddenly hyper-aware of what she was doing. Indulging in the fairy tale of harmony between a parasite and its prey? *Preposterous*. And yet, there she was, donning the very kamui her sister wore to defy all preconceived notions about the world as she knew it.

Dismissing such thoughts and electing not to indulge until later, Satsuki followed the trail of blood down the hall, growing more and more frustrated when the path of carnage stopped abruptly in dead ends. Ryuuko was obviously looking for something she couldn't find, but what?

A sudden thought occurred to her. Realization of where her delinquent little sister could have possibly gone stopped her in her tracks and forced her in another direction. Red characters loomed overhead, and she followed them obediently. Why couldn't she have thought of this before? It was only logical, after all.

The student council president quickly cut through the maintenance area, using the god robe's superior strength to ram the doors open. Ignoring the plethora of wounded Nudist Beach operatives, she burst through the sealed entranceway and into her desired destination - the engine room.

She was right in assuming the delinquent had gone there. A sea of black converged onto a single point, although it was a futile gesture - they were felled as quickly as they came. Satsuki combat rolled to the side as a low-ranking engineer crashed into a wall nearby, hiding behind one of the massive turbines that in turn powered a large impeller.

She remembered what her senseis had taught her once, long ago. “Look for an opening,” she recited to herself, quietly. “Strike at the first opportunity.”

So she waited in the dark as Ryuuko finished off the rest of her wannabe opponents with ease. Assured of her victory, a maniacal grin spread across fair features. Turning to the massive generators that powered the ship, she raised her swords far above her head, conveniently ignoring the elder’s presence in the room.

Bingo.

The tantō easily whistled through the air and pierced through the girl's arm, the force pinning her to a panel. In her shock, both blades were dropped unceremoniously to the floor, droplets of red soon shedding upon them.

"Why, you little - !"

Engine abandoned, Ryuuko wrenched the short blade from where it pierced into her brachioradialis. Red fibers soon dropped into place within the expanse, sewing the wound shut. Pretenses abandoned, the opportunity to fully disarm her enemy was forgotten and she threw the blade back with more force, thinking only to return the favor. Satsuki ducked, the short blade barely whizzing past an ear before deeply embedding itself into the bulkhead behind her.

So she had gotten her full attention. Good.

Rearmed, Ryuuko brought herself to full height and charged, seemingly disappearing into thin air before reappearing suddenly in front of her, both blades raised. The elder sibling blinked. She didn’t even see the pleated folds of the hakama so much as ruffle.

Not so good.

Satsuki turned and fled down the narrow passageway before they had a chance to stab her heart, only momentarily stopping to retrieve her Bakuzan half. The cacophony of groaning metal and a low roar behind her all but confirmed the other’s pursuit. Carefully setting Bakuzan Gako between her teeth, she quickly ascended the ladder and emerged topside. A thick plume of smoke following a detonated blast rushed past her, harsh waves of heat lapping at uncovered skin. Junketsu’s launched pauldrons crashed into the spiraling stairwell below her again, barely missing her heels. She quickly pulled the rest of herself up and sealed the hatch, harshly bending the metal with one well-placed kick to ensure the opening could never be used again.

An indistinct hand signal quickly summoned three Elites (plus the Mankanshoku girl, for some reason) to her. With a finesse only she possessed, she quickly relayed her revised plan using only hand signals, trusting Inumuta to be observing the exchange from his vantage point.

“Quickly,” she commanded. “We must get - ”

A fist punched through the flooring and latched onto her ankle like a vise.

Too late.

Another fist soon joined the first one, widening the hole. Then, a familiar mop of messy hair emerged, bringing with it the visage of one Ryuuko, wild-eyed and tired of this cat-and-mouse game.

“Got you!” she growled, savagely yanking her sister down with her. Satsuki, however, had other ideas.

“Senketsu Shippu!”

A choked cry of surprise told the elder sibling all that she needed to know as all three rocketed into the sky. Abruptly pulling a 180, she dove towards the ship, only pulling up at the very last moment. Ryuuko was dislodged by the sudden turn, harshly crashing against the ruined plating as her grip failed her.

"Now! Hold her down!"

Five people coming from five different directions rushed her. Using the distraction provided by multiple hard-light clones of a certain blue-haired techie, Uzu easily blindsided the recovering girl with his bamboo blade. The red and black swords flew out of her grip and skidded to a stop a little ways away. A sloppy effort to reclaim the blades was halted by a black blur kicking her legs out from under her. The five pinned the brainwashed girl to the steel deck, each immobilizing a limb, or the torso with their body weight. Struggling, Ryuuko rasped a litany of swears as Nonon shifted her weight on her back and left leg, only moving enough so that the giant man could plunge the Anti-COVERS device under Junketsu’s “eyes”.

Mako also adjusted her hold so that she was lying prone in front of her best friend, noses practically touching each other. The chimera made to move towards her, but over two hundred kilograms of combined weight clogged any movement. She settled for glaring daggers instead, locking eyes with the small girl even as the device fired up.

"Ryuuko, you have to snap out of it!" Mako shouted, making an incredible effort not to add dramatic flair to her speeches, as she was wont to do. “I know you’re upset, but you have to wear your Sunday best again!”

"What are you talking about?" came the growled response from between clenched teeth.

“We’re going to separate you from Junketsu and make you come back to your senses!” Ira thundered, further digging the cylindrical device into her back.

Ryuuko laughed lightly, the breathy sound so uncharacteristically gentle from the teenager. She didn’t bother to tear her eyes away from her ex-best friend. The next words came so thoughtlessly and carefree from the roughened vocal chords that even Satsuki was visibly stunned, if only a little.

“Ever the gentleman, Gamagoori? I’ll make sure to paint the ship with your blood first, then. In fact, I’ll take the tiny troll next, then the dog, then the blind freak, and finally dear little

Satsuki. Or should I kill the butler and the naked apes beforehand? Either way, you will all make a fine present for mother. As for my *best friend*, I think a friendly chat is long overdue.”

“So she’s completely gone, then.” Gamagoori murmured quietly, increasing the device’s fan speed when it produced disappointingly little results.

“That’s not true!” the bowl-cut-haired girl interrupted, using the prostrated dark-haired girl’s head as a mount for her palms despite the other’s protests. “Ryuuko’s still Ryuuko! Even if she has life fibers in her body, or if she’s mad that she’s not human, Ryuuko is still herself! And Senketsu’s her best outfit!” she shouted, crashing heads against the aforementioned girl with an audible clack. Ryuuko, for her part, was stunned speechless.

“Why can’t it separate Matoi?” Ira grumbled in frustration, almost to himself.

“You have to remember!” Mako implored, ignoring the larger man. “Don’t you remember what you promised to me the first night after the trip? You said you wouldn’t forget! But now you did, and it makes me so sad. But when you said to me that night that you really thought me as your friend and that you trusted me, that you would always remember! So never forget!”

"I - "

Suddenly, something flashed before her eyes. She tried to focus on it, tried to remember, but it was whisked away like leaves in the wind. Similar images danced before her, only giving her short glimpses into a life she had forgotten before they were callously silenced. Satsuki easily noticed her intense discomfort, sensing a wedge to drive between the girl and her kamui.

“Matoi Ryuuko! Have you forgotten your goal of avenging your father so easily? Have you forsaken your friend and family so easily? If you’ve bowed to the will of the life fibers, you have turned your back on everything you stand for, you pig in human clothing!”

The delinquent’s head hurt. She needed to get far, far away from the madness and madding crowd. The pressure in her skull mounted, threatening to burst. To make things worse, the suction machine affixed to her back seized and ground to a halt, painfully pulling at the strands which bound her to the god robe.

“Release me!” she hissed, violently bucking even as the visions started to flicker before her eyes again, meld with the falsified memories, and corrupt them beyond repair.

“Ryuuko!” the brunette shouted in terror. Instinctively, she pulled their bodies closer, even as the taller girl’s pained howl directly slammed against her eardrums.

"Let! Me! **Free!**"

Everything exploded in a shower of twinkling stars and blinding sparkles. The extraction device easily disintegrated under the force, reduced to nothing but mere scraps of metal. The three devas plus Mako and Satsuki barely managed to hold on for dear life, clinging even as a

wave of pure white light engulfed them all and tore at the plating around them. A noisy range of calls answered, all varying in tone and pitch.

“Ryuuko!”

“Matoi!”

“Underachiever!”

When it all ended, the chimera was still lying face down against the ship, with one crucial difference - Junketsu was no longer activated. Ryuuko was desynchronized. Normal.

Human.

It was weird to see her in Junketsu, Satsuki mused. Even one so uncouth and disgraceful in form could appear refined when clad in the garb. Though the strict militaristic style of the uniform contrasted with the wild, disorganized style of her blood-sibling, it still bestowed her an appearance that commanded the utmost respect. A symbol of animalistic abandon paired with one whose inhibitions were practically nonexistent and expected to beat the incarnation of restraint and resolve? Laughable at most. Still, mother had joined them together, and despite their discordant styles, beat them soundly.

Speaking of Ryuuko, it was a miracle that she hadn't tried to escape again when everyone was distracted by her little light show. Perhaps she knew it was futile. Either way, her struggles, practically nonexistent post-transformation, were duly noted. She didn't complain when the group turned her over so that she faced them, nor did she move when they repositioned themselves accordingly. Only the rage in her eyes betrayed her apparent acquiescence, the desire to rend and kill still present even through her tired and battered form with every heaving breath.

Physical helplessness did nothing to dissuade her, however. With her abnormally pronounced incisors, she tried to bite the hands and arms of anyone within her extremely limited reach. The crazed appearance in her eyes was more than enough to confirm suspicions that the kamui's hold was still as strong as ever. Satsuki exhaled through her nose. Too late for the plan, she supposed. Standing over her sister, she addressed Ryuuko, keeping her tone neutral.

"Matoi, you *must* listen to reason. Ragyou has brainwashed you."

Indignant, her captive spat at her. The elder sister wiped the spittle off with one practiced thumb swipe, her expression a mixture of pity and righteous fury.

"*Mother* has shown me the *truth*! All you've ever done is lie to me to get your way. And where has *that* gotten *you*? Shacked up with four *losers*, and a group of exhibitionists that bare their asses to the entire world!"

“It matters not. Ragyou has never broken my resolve, and the blade of my heart will prevail in this fight. Know this, Matoi Ryuuko! Humans do not live for clothing, and they never will!”

“Get fucked, you damn - ”

“Ryuuko. You have to stop this.” Senketsu firmly interrupted, his one eye uncharacteristically terrified and pleading. The Elites glanced quizzically at each other at the self-interruption, only understanding when their leader's brows knit together at the apparent one-sided exchange, watching both kamui and sibling intently.

“Eh?”

“I admit, Satsuki cannot hear me when I speak, the way only you can. Our strength is dwarfed by yours in comparison, and our advantages gained only through surprise. And yet, our hearts are one. We are of one of mind to bring you back your senses.”

“S-shut up...”

“Can you imagine the strain Satsuki bears wearing me during our fight!? No other human could do that. No one but Satsuki Kiryuuin!”

“So what?” she snarled. “It doesn’t change the fact that she’s a loser.”

"Matoi, you must take Junketsu off." Satsuki commanded, holding the blade to the pinned girl's throat.

"Like hell," she scoffed, pressing her flesh into the blade with a mocking sneer and grinning wickedly when she saw a shocked expression flash across her face for the briefest of seconds. "Junketsu feels so amazing; I can hardly stand it!"

“That is the bliss of slavery,” the elder retorted in disgust.

“So what!?” she shrieked with derisive laughter. “By making the least possible amount of skin contact one can draw the life fiber’s power but withstand their influence. Heh... It’s just fear. You want the power of clothing, but are afraid of losing your mind. The pleasure of wearing Junketsu is out of this world... people are born to be worn by clothing. Adorning them should be their greatest happiness in life.”

The older sibling grimaced. So this was the extent of the mental refitting *dearest* mother had been able to accomplish. The grave misfortune of losing the sibling she had fought for after all these years -*again*- just as she had gotten her was not unrecognized. Nevertheless, if she didn’t do something, humanity would be well and truly up the creek without a paddle.

"Then you are truly lost to me. I will destroy anyone who stands in my way, *no matter who they may be*."

She pushed Ryuuko's head against the ground and deftly rolled her over, slipping Bakuzan Gako between the teenager's neck and the kamui's collar. The cold blade sent a shiver down the other's spine, a throaty snarl greeting her invasive attempts to part god robe and wearer.

“Keep her pinned,” Satsuki commanded, clenching a wad of white cloth and preparing to manually cut it away.

Ryuuko's muffled protests did nothing but place confidence in her actions' results. Engrossed in her new mission, Satsuki wasn't aware of what her younger sibling was doing until the

latter's hand twitched. She realized her mistake too late, but adjusted accordingly and leapt away.

"Watch out!"

The hulking mass of humans barely had any time to react before the world exploded in a shower of light again. Ryuuko wrenched her left arm from Gamagoori's grip with great effort and slammed it into the ground, triggering the activator plates and driving three hypodermic needles home.

Her captors were blasted apart by the explosion of blue-tinged energy ringed with hundreds of small glimmering stars that followed, the blast radiating outwards before shooting into space. Nonon and Mako flew away first, then Uzu. Ira and Satsuki resisted the push and resolved to strike a Ryuuko left vulnerable to attack in that split instant after transformation, but a powerful gust of wind soon knocked them off of their feet.

Satsuki mentally berated herself from her relatively painful position on the metal flooring. Of course she would use the energy of engaging her transformation to her advantage. It wasn't like she hadn't done it before - her fight with Gamagoori during the Naturals Elections should have been analyzed more.

The chimera slid past the sprawled group and scooped up her favored weapon before any of them could react. Shaking with barely-contained rage, she gripped it tightly with both hands. As if reacting to her very thoughts, the curved handle unlocked and the blade extended, growing over twice its normal length within seconds. Furious, she held it over her head, ready to plunge it into the ship proper.

"Scissor sword! **Decapitation Mode!**"

Just when Satsuki thought things could literally not get worse, a high pitched peal of laughter choked the air. She grit her teeth and mentally swore.

Harime Nui!

Chapter End Notes

Senketsu is regarded as a "he" only to Mako, Ryuuko, and Satsuki (eventually). To everyone else, the kamui is just an article of clothing. All anatomical inaccuracies (eg: irises being dilated instead of just pupils, how people can survive long falls/brutal attacks without their bones being broken or some other form of trauma being inflicted upon them, etc.) is in keeping with the show's portrayal.

Ragyou (Int): I am Young; I am Old

Chapter Summary

Ragyou debates the points of love, hate, and everything in between.

"But these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence."

(Luke 19:27, New American Standard Bible)

Is it better to be loved or feared?

That was the question Ragyou Kiryuuin asked herself as she idly watched Shinra-Kōuketsu painstakingly being stitched together one thread at a time. Instead of observing from her usual perch on a catwalk high above the brainwashed masses, she had elected for a more... intimate position. It had been a niggling thought that had plagued her for decades, especially ever since her *dear daughter's* betrayal.

Red fibers lazily drifted in the air, shimmering brightly in the dimmed lighting that surrounded blazing spotlights. A picturesque scene to those more artistically inclined, perhaps. The conglomerate head leaned forward and embraced her youngest "child", who was busy guiding tell-tale black and red strips of cloth into the whirring sewing machine. A perfectly manicured hand slid down the well-traveled valley between two supple mounds of flesh, and Nui leaned against it, already used to the oft-versed routine. A ghost of a smile toyed upon the elder's lips.

Certainly being feared had its perks. Power over others was the core reason and motivation- everything else was just frosting on the cake. Individuals would elevate your status to godhood, if you were so inclined. Tributes would be presented. Assassination or betrayal attempts were less likely- a measure of prevention against incurring the person's ire, perhaps. The masses would throw themselves at each other in a pitiful attempt to garner more favor in exchange for something paltry- their lives, for their family's existence, or their entire way of life, for instance.

A red tongue danced across equally red lips. Scarlet like blood, like the life fibers in her veins.

She remembered a village long ago. Somewhere in Africa, in the remote parts of the Congo, she had her personal helicopter pilot circle the air above like a buzzard, tracking the

movements of the local residents. She remembered stepping out, her radiance basking her presence with its sheer brilliance, and tasting the sudden onslaught of fear that suddenly graced the invading soldiers. She remembered the gunfire, the bullets tearing away at skin long integrated with the nigh-invulnerable blessing of life fiber integration. How they were slaughtered like dogs before her in her presence with nothing but a sewing pin. How Rei looked upon her with awe as she wedged her way out of her makeshift hiding place.

She remembered her very first kill.

It was many years ago. Her mother's hands closed upon hers, steadying her shaking limbs and wrapping her uncalloused fingers around the hilt of a blade. She remembered it was in the late autumn, for the trees were bare and deadened, and only a few leaves drifted from their branches like angels falling from the heavens. Before her lay a man, broken, beaten, and battered. He was keeled over in absolute agony, and Ragyou had felt a twinge of pity for the poor human- a mere twinge, and nothing more, for he had made an attempt on their lives when he decided they were his next targets for mugging.

"Don't be scared, darling," she had said. "Pigs in human clothing are beyond our notice and contempt."

She remembered how her mother squeezed reassuringly, and helped bring her arms above her head before letting the forged metal descend. Later that night, no matter how many times she washed her hands, she still felt tainted. Impure.

It was at that time that her own mother wiped her tears and took her into the lower floors and ushered her into a room previously sealed off- the baths. A large cavernous room greeted her, a marble floor with a depression in the middle of a room was filled with steaming water poured by a newly-installed statue of a woman and an overturned jug. The water of life, her mother had called them, gently tugging at the young child's hand and leading her further into the water. There, she scrubbed her clean with a sponge, and cleansed her with feather-soft touches that lasted a little too long on her skin.

Afterwards, when they were swathed in fine cloths, her mother led her deeper into the bowels of the mansion, to the Kiryuuin clan's most closely guarded secret.

The primordial life fiber.

It easily dwarfed the room in size and magnificence, bathing the peeling paint and the crumbling marble with a feverishly warm orange glow. It thrummed with life, yellow pulsating within its core rhythmically, as if it had a heartbeat of its own. Tendrils of red reached out towards the duo like snakes, slithering through the air to a stop before them, seeming to consider them. Shoma laughed lightly, extending a hand to meet them. They snaked around her arm, as if in greeting, before unraveling themselves. Shoma grinned, and uttered a command so quiet that it almost seemed like the very air around them breathed the word.

And in that instant, they left the immediate presence of their caretaker and wrapped around the young girl loosely, so as to create a cocoon made of threads. She had kicked. She had cried. She had clawed at the interior of the enclosure as silk-like threads bit into her skin. Her

mother spoke reassuringly to her, saying it was for her own good. She wanted to believe it was the truth, even as more of them pricked her. Her teeth gnawed at the fibers binding her, almost succeeding in making a hole in the wrapping.

And then, *it* spoke to her.

And it told her everything. From the time of its inception to the end of the universes it originated from. The beginning of things and the end of everything. Life and death and everything in between.

She visited that room regularly after that night, gleaning information under the cover of darkness and learning all it knew until the sun had long peeked over the forest and bathed the mansion in its rays.

The scars on her back never quite healed from that day, but Ragyou paid it no mind. She had a taste of its powers, and was loathe to let her newfound potential go to waste.

Such was the notable occasion that when she arrived in the chamber covered in familiar blood that she was given the title of the new keeper of the primordial life fiber. And from that day forward, her bloody reign over newly-established Kiryuuin conglomerate began.

And thus, she knew the power of fear.

But love? Love was a very peculiar thing. If she were beloved by all, certainly no small amount of people would defend her. Indeed, countless groups of people throughout centuries had rallied around a charismatic figure and laid their lives down to protect whoever was in charge- even starting devastating riots in their name should imprisonment or death fall upon him or her.

But what about the manner that said love would be displayed? She certainly knew of physical affirmations- those traits were practically passed down through countless generations, mother-to-daughter. Marionette threads, charismatic displays of power, and purification, a private ceremony affirming the Kiryuuin clan's subjugation to the life fibers and bringing each new generation closer and closer to uniformity. To refuse such a blessing was worse than the original sin of mankind- it was pure blasphemy.

Nui paused in her labors momentarily and rubbed her cheek against hers, as if she were conscious of her mother's inner turmoil. The sickly sweet, overwhelmingly fruity perfume of hers cloyingly brushed against the mother's nostrils. Sensing no movement from the other, the blonde's head tilted upward and captured pink glossed lips in a kiss, smiling as she did so. Ragyou returned the sentiment, albeit less enthusiastically as the other. She broke the kiss with a toothy grin, releasing her hold and nudging the carefree girl back to work. Business before pleasure, after all.

Nui. A creature of life fibers and life-blood born from her DNA and raised as a loyal servant of the life fibers. A glorified dog in a pink, frilly leash at her beck and call. Encephalic disassociation at its finest and most chaotic. A "daughter" whom she believed was the only one truly worthy of being called a Kiryuuin after the apparent "death" of her second child due to her intimate nature with the scarlet alien threads.

Satsuki. An ingrate that refused her ministrations. A ritual as sacred and treasured by generations' worth of Kiryuuin clan members wasn't something to be taken lightly. If she knew whatever schemes and false hopes the brat had entertained in her quest for vengeance, she wouldn't have performed the coming-of-age rite. Rather, other methods would have been done to ensure she developed according to her wishes before such an honor would be bestowed.

Those things would have to be eased in and executed with the utmost care to avoid any negative response. She had chosen careful psychological molding, depriving poor Satsuki of maternal love while still reinforcing her presence periodically to avoid an apathetic response in order to foster a desperate need to appease her mother or garner any type of attention were excellent ideas... ideas that would have worked, hadn't her wonderful ex-husband had informed that brat of her plans at a young age and counteracted the effects.

Ryuuko. She laughed lowly, the sound an odd, guttural sound in the back of her throat. A wildfire in the form of a half-human girl with gloriously unswerving determination who wore her heart on her sleeve and knew no meaning for the word "yield". Purifying such a perfect specimen already in a harmonious relationship with her clothing would be a futile gesture, would it not? Why offer ministrations to someone carrying out the life fibers' will and practically riding out nigh-orgasmic levels of pleasure (a reward for being so faithful to the cause, she reminded herself) all the time?

A tongue rolled against perfectly white molars, and she allowed herself a throaty laugh.

Even the proudest spirit could be broken with time, she supposed. All they needed as a mother's love, and they were like soft putty in her hands, ready to be molded into whatever she desired. Those not related by blood that capitulated to neither love nor fear, she dominated without mercy. Mental refitting, marionette threads, an occasional sleight of hand- all would fall before her in same way.

Three small clinks filled the air as a worn hammer struck against a metal bell. On other days, the massive chimes installed within the elongated tower would have been powerful enough to rock the building. But now, it sounded as tired and worn as the rest of the academy, the formerly clear and boastful tolling now reduced to a white noise in the background, easily forgotten.

A phone buzzed somewhere in a hidden pocket in her dress. Ragyou casually retrieved it and answered. Rei's calm, measured voice filled the air in between, and the Kiryuuin matriarch bit back the bile rising in her throat as her loyal assistant updated her on the situation outside, even as it scratched at the tissue and burned it harshly. Nevertheless, she outwardly showed almost no signs of her distress- it was important to be level-headed at all times, no matter how pressing the situation. Nui paused in her work and looked up at her appraisingly, and the Revocs CEO quietly dismissed her concerns with a lackadaisical hand gesture.

"I'm going back to the mansion," Ragyou whispered, giving her a quick peck on the cheek. Nui fawned and indulged herself in her labors once more; the simple gesture of affection could have been something more, but they were pressed for time. "You'll be a good girl, won't you?"

She knew the reminder was a futile gesture, but it was a gesture that she pursued nonetheless. No use babysitting someone who could take care of herself, even though said "person" had the tendency to waltz out and do as she damn well pleased more than half the time. No matter. There was other, more pressing matters to be looked at, and a primordial life fiber to feed.

"Oui, Lady Ragyou," she responded dreamily, dark blue orbs shining with poorly hidden desire.

Pointed clicks against the hard flooring punctuated her every step away from the incessantly humming machines. A sudden thought occurred to her, and she stopped abruptly.

"Oh," she turned her head, giving the one-eyed "girl" one last look. "Do try to play nice with your sisters, whenever they get back. It would be a shame if something happened to Satsuki before your greatest work has been completed."

She departed the school grounds to the sound of the blonde's laughter. Entering the modified helicopter flanked by hundreds of cloth-forme COVERS, Ragyou decided that love was far more effective than hate.

Collision

Chapter Summary

TL;DR: A wild Nui appears! Ryuuko goes Satsuki-surfing, and Satsuki tries to get away with murder.

Chapter Notes

"Those sailing up the creek should bring a paddle. Those in Tokyo Bay with life fiber hybrids and kamuis should bring several thousand, a legal will, and an extra set of arm floaties."

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"It is the calm and silent water that drowns a man. Pray to God, but continue to row to the shore."

~Nautical proverbs (Unknown)

Ryuuko grunted. The blood-coated blade glinted sickly in the fading sunlight and contrasted sharply with the azure skies. One red droplet moved along the edge and pooled, falling perfectly onto the corner of her lips. A tongue lapped at it absentmindedly, and she relished the coppery metallic taste. She grinned, red harshly contrasting ivory white. Time to sink this tugboat.

The sword swung downward.

Nine and a half pairs of eyes nervously followed the path of the blade, unable to stop the disaster that was surely about to follow. The other half-pair watched it with a sick satisfaction, practically counting down the microseconds until impact from her perch far above the chaos.

“Wait!”

A sickly red wave of energy flew from the oversized blade in a perfect arc, screaming as it easily sliced through the air. It noisily slammed into the waters, where it parted the water and cut deep. Fishing vessels in the distance capsized, their smaller counterparts easily sent

airborne from the resulting gale winds. Gigantic waves created parallel walls up to twenty meters tall, the aborted attack's results easily dwarfing the carrier. With a great roaring rumble, it collapsed back into itself in a point of singularity, roughly tossing the ship about as if it were nothing more than leaves in the wind.

A brown blur had launched itself at the brainwashed girl, who had barely managed to avoid a head-on collision by ducking at the last moment. Unfortunately for the latter, said blur hooked herself onto a pauldron, slid down the wearer's backside, latched onto a hakama-covered leg, and steadfastly held on like a koala, despite the host's vicious attempts at dislodging her.

“Ryuuko-oo-o-ooo-o!” Mako cried, both out of fear of finding herself cast adrift in treacherous waters and for her friend, her first and only friend that really understood her as much as the rest of her admittedly insanely dysfunctional family.

“Ryuuko-chan!” Nui giggled, suddenly appearing behind Satsuki much to the latter's displeasure. “You left without saying goodbye! I was going to give you *this*,” she wriggled her purple scissor blade, somehow managing to pull it out of her perfectly coiffed pigtails. “...But I see you’re busy playing with your friends. How cute!”

An annoyed growl was the only indication she was listening, said hybrid unfortunately busied in trying to wedge her sword between her leg and Mako's torso to pry the younger girl off. Mako grit her teeth and only clung harder before eventually making the tactical decision to migrate onto the other's back. Protected by the absurd enormity of Junketsu's eyes, she successfully evaded any attempt at removal by hand or by sword. Ryuuko flailed about viciously as the eldest Mankanshoku sibling entrenched herself deeper with every jerky movement she made, taking to darting around at excessive speeds while abruptly changing direction and sharply whipping around corners.

"How *annoying*," Nui chirped. "All these public displays of affection are really starting to get on my nerves!" And with every word, she approached the struggling pair, already making a move to slice the brat into bits.

Satsuki acted quicker however, using the momentum from a hastily executed charge to bowl the blonde over with a brutish tackle. The youngest Kiryuuin momentarily flew head over heels before landing a short ways away, her sister straddling her head in between red heeled ankles.

“Ngh! No fair, Sats!” she cried indignantly. Satsuki planted both stilettos in the back of her skull in response, scowling. A heel ground into the mess of tangled golden locks like a pestle, eliciting a sharp yelp.

Her well-honed body tensed, and ligaments flexed in tandem. Muscles rippled under her skin like those of a tiger about to strike down hapless prey. A short spring off the life fiber monster's sprawled body and a quick combat roll later ensured the victorious retrieval of the missing ebony blade's half.

“Mankanshoku!” She shouted; the very air molecules trembled before her voice. “Blind Matoi!”

Ryuuko groaned both balance and vision were suddenly robbed from her; sloppily staggering left and right as the added weight countered every attempt at regaining voluntary movement control. The ebony-haired teen stealthily slipped towards both no-stars, knives at the ready. Twin Bakuzan slipped between the kamui and the younger sibling's wrists, deftly sawing through the fabric with a single tug.

Ryuuko bellowed as the pain of severed fibers ran up her arm. Blood spurted from the gash like a broken fire hydrant, but the elder Kiryuuin pressed on without hesitation until the tear reached the blocky arm guards, figuring she had nicked several veins on accident. Mako for her part felt absolutely sick to her stomach and quailed the longer Ryuuko's howled screams grated against her ears; how couldn't you feel that way after hearing your best friend in agony - agony you yourself had a heavy hand in causing?

"Lean back," the Student Council President commanded, aiming for the pleated folds of the hakama next once the underachiever complied.

To her surprise, a purple blade suddenly appeared, stopping hers from connecting with a sharp crack. The frilly pink satan herself smiled disarmingly at the trio, effectively sweeping up her soul-sister with little more than an exaggerated flourish in the wake of their stunned silence.

"Can't let you do that, Satsuki~!" she hooted merrily, slinging the still-bleeding Ryuuko over a shoulder with one hand and carelessly tossing the brunette away with the other.

"And why not?" Satsuki demanded, sweeping a leg low and fast, only to have the blonde casually sidestep it and practically teleport her way to the recovering no-star.

"Because, silly," she beamed happily, planting a foot on the squirming girl and placing the tip of her blade on her victim's windpipe. "Ryuuko will die if Junketsu is taken off! She belongs to Lady Ragyou and only Lady Ragyou now!"

Realization dawned upon the head of Honnouji. Her voice was sharp and accusatory. "You sewed Junketsu onto her body."

"Yup!" Nui grinned, pressing the blade into the soft, yielding flesh.

Surprisingly, it wasn't Satsuki or the four devas that came to her rescue in that very second, nor was it the rest of the Mankanshoku clan. Tsumugu sprang from the wreckage and firmly landed nearby, guns ablaze and chewing through the vast reserves like candy.

"Begone!"

"Awh," the life fiber creature giggled, effortlessly carrying her soul-sister overhead with a hand as a torrential rain of jamming needles darted towards her, easily dodging them in twirled pirouettes. "You humans sure do like wasting your time on things that don't work."

She deftly clutched her purple scissor blade and slammed it against the flooring. Metal plates sprung out of place upon impact, the linear path of destruction traveling down the ship in a

single line. Tsumugu braced himself, but it was in vain. The force easily carried him up and over the the deck, sending him and his mech into the churning waves below.

“Looks like he couldn’t take even a tiny bit of my girlish charm. Oh well.”

The heavy musk that always hung around the teenage delinquent soothed her artificial nerves and brought a sense of paradoxically familiar abnormality to the situation. Nui’s arm snaked around Ryuuko's waist, inhaling sharply as her roving fingers encountered miniscule sharp breaks and rips in the kamui's fibers where the extraction device chewed at. How insulting. Her singular eye narrowed almost imperceptibly in well-concealed rage. These filthy naked apes dared lay a hand on Ryuuko? Almost absentmindedly, she repaired them with cold, dextrous fingers, spooling spare thread from a portable storage device hidden within salmon pink sleeves. The damage sustained by Satsuki would have to be looked at later. Soon, the kamui was more or less restored, although coated in large splotches of red and heavily tattered at the arms.

"Harime Nui!"

The pigtailed head - sans body - moved, the neck twisting around a complete 180 degrees with an audible cascade of snapping joints. With the exception of Satsuki and Ryuuko, everyone visibly shuddered in utter disgust.

“Yes, Satsuki?” She answered, voice dripping with false innocence.

The three devas’ collective war cry was her only answer, Nonon, Ira, and Uzu striking at her using a classic three-pronged attack. She relinquished her hold on Ryuuko and sprung backwards, barely missing twin Bakuzan’s lethal kiss in the process. A skein of blond hair soon littered the ruined deck, drifting leisurely over the marred surface.

She giggled, drawing her pinky finger across her neck in a typical decapitory motion. “Good one, Satsuki! You nearly took my head off there.”

Again with that girly laugh. Satsuki’s infamous eyebrows knitted together and the lines on her forehead creased ever so slightly. She’d have to make sure she didn’t miss the next time, then.

“Always so serious.” Nui stuck her tongue out playfully. “Gosh, you’re no fun at all. Oh, Ryuukoooo~!”

A white cloth-covered fist squarely punched the side of the eldest Kiryuuin sibling’s mouth in response. Satsuki’s jaw rattled upon impact, and she staggered away before another one connected.

“Gah!”

She spat a wad of blood to the side, eyes narrowing as Nui playfully dodged Uzu’s sharpened claw weapon and practically danced around Nonon’s earnest attempts at murder a little ways away. She felt rather than saw a short but powerful ripple rip through the ship, which all but confirmed Gamagoori’s heavy hand in the chaos. Sensing Ryuuko rear up again, she

straightened up, squaring her stance and holding the knife halves in a defensive position. Her knees bent and she pushed off the metal flooring, leaving a terrible gust in her wake.

Ryuuko responded in kind, using her favored weapon to block an oncoming strike. A heel pivoted, and with the grace of a boxer performing ballet, Ryuuko rapidly spun on the singular blue point. A cyclonic whirlwind of red and white battered against twin Bakuzan. The black blades rattled and violently shuddered against the repeated assault, threatening to loose itself from its owner's hand had it not been for her superior grip on the handle. The elder of the two dug her heels in deeper and pushed back, only managing to get the red blade in a temporary lock by sandwiching it in between.

"Eat this!"

Junketsu's pauldrons extended, the sharpening lances darting forward in a fraction of a second. Satsuki quickly broke contact and ran along the vertical length of the carrier's observation tower, trusting her instincts to feel rather than see her little sister recover and practically bound after her.

"Oooraaa~!"

Her ears picked up the faintest sound of a bolt sliding into place, and dodged the oncoming attack from behind. The metal structure visibly shivered as the red sword embedded deep inside the tower, causing its occupants no small amount of alarm.

The Student Council President neatly backflipped off the crumbling surface, body arching perfectly back as a high caliber round barely grazed past her stomach and found its way into Ryuuko's back. Looking up in the small span of time her body flew through the air, she spotted a disapproving Aikuro gazing at something towards the water. The Nudist Beach leader seemed to reach for a comm system near his ear, and flicked his gaze back at Ryuuko, enraged and furiously trying to pull her weapon out of the ship. A lip curled in disgust.

"Again!"

She was smart to have moved away from Ryuuko when she did, Satsuki supposed, freely giving the sniper another opening by tactically retreating to the rest of her elites. The gunman bitterly chewed his lit cigarette, pulling the bolt back and firing off another caliber round. The hybrid cried out in anguish once more, the darkened hole already closing.

"Die already," she snarled, sliding the red blade out with a mighty wrench and bounced off the tilting tower, speeding towards her target with her weapon outstretched.

"Lady Satsuki!"

She stopped and deftly caught the ear piece without looking - a reflex born out of necessity when Nui was in her more jovially whimsical murderous moods.

"Just in case," Inumuta explained. "I'll be able to patch you through to the rest of us in a second."

Satsuki nodded once, completely understanding the implications. "Status report?"

There was a fury of clicking beside her as the blue-haired Deva typed at impossible speeds on his PDA.

"We're down to two available choppers for use. Nui's interference only allows one to get off ground at the moment; trying to get both of them up in the air without her noticing is suicide. The Naked Sol has taken too much damage to survive a direct assault on Ragyou. However, since we were successful in our main goal of extracting you, we can head towards the nearest compatible port for repairs."

The sharpshooter flew overhead, neatly crash-landing into a battalion of Nudist Beach members newly summoned by Aikuro for support. To her credit, Satsuki didn't even bat an eye.

"And Nui?"

"We can lead a diversionary force to distract her while the ship gets away," he suggested. Numbers flew past the screen in a breakneck pace, probabilities and percentages somehow appearing one after another in an orderly fashion amid the chaos.

Satsuki's mind whirled despite rapidly steeping mental fatigue. Years of training made deciphering such information and applying it right away a trivial task. Simulations simultaneously played out in her mind, one right after the other. She opened her mouth to speak, and Inumuta immediately stiffened, his impossibly straight back somehow straightening even further. The President didn't allow herself to smile, but inwardly beamed. Her soldiers, ever loyal, had their ears forever opened to her, even when their mind was elsewhere in combat.

"Get Gamagoori in the air. The majority of COVERS are based in Honnouji Academy for ease of access to the general population - what little remains of it after their abduction and your valiant efforts at rescuing them, that is. His orders are to carpet bomb the complex with special focus on the main tower. Sanageyama should be more than enough to distract Nui while he leads an assault on the academy. Nonon provides tactical air support with her rocket launchers to keep her away from getting too close to him. He'll need it, even with his Shingantsu. Harime Nui is not to be underestimated at any and all costs. If the ship's computers are intact, keep her from focusing too much on either of them with hard light clones. Understood?"

Houka nodded once, knowing better than to question his superior. Satsuki didn't even have to look at the blue-haired teen to know that he was busy relaying the message to the rest of his equals - she trusted all her hand-picked Elites with her life, and then some.

A sudden heavy clomping startled both of them. Cobalt eyes widened in sheer anticipation, then narrowed. Ryuuko attacked. Satsuki reacted.

"Senketsu Shippu!"

Too late.

Satsuki shouted in agony as a long diagonal slash bit into where her legs fused with the kamui. She felt Senketsu tighten around her reflexively in a frenzied panic as it frantically tried to stem the bleeding, the suspenders uncomfortably being drawn taut across her breasts. Its singular eye, now tinier than usual, blinked rapidly at her before pulling at the suspenders again. Satsuki hissed at the action, feeling her muscles suddenly ache with overexertion, and quietly swept piercing cobalt eyes over her snide opponent.

She was facing off against a life fiber-infused human with powers magnified by completely submitting to the aliens' vile mission, while her own strength was clipped and blood reserves were dwindling to almost nothing with every passing second. Meanwhile, Nui was going to town on the Elites and Nudist Beach, and the last bastion of humanity was doomed to failure if she didn't do anything. Every second spent engaged in a pointless struggle was a moment Ragyou could use to her advantage. So she did the only sensible thing she could in that situation.

She calculated the odds, then ran.

"Oh no, you don't," Ryuuko snarled, a trail of blazing blue following behind. Roaring in bloody triumph and cocking a leg back, she easily caught up to the ebony-haired dictator firmly planted a side thrust kick into her ribs.

'Get out of my way!' the elder thought angrily, leaping away only to have the other spring after her as if it were a mere game.

She needed to put as much distance between both of them and the Naked Sol. Hopefully Ryuuko would get lost in the unfamiliar territory of the Kanto region before she realized what was going on. She focused on the thin strips of bare flesh before her, readied the Bakuzan halves, and moved to strike.

What should have lightly grazed skin or pushed her aside pierced through flesh instead.

The twin black blades jutted through her sister, drawing a lengthy, impressive score into the otherwise unmarred pale skin before burying deep within. Satsuki started, trying to pull both weapons out of the newly opened wounds, but softly, ever so gently, a pair of hands stopped the effort by curling around hers. A small velvety smile was plastered on the brainwashed teen's face, and sparkling blue eyes glittered with mirth before closing in contentment. Without much ado, she leaned forward and pulled on the embedded swords until both of their noses touched and foreheads bumped against each other, uncaring of the added injury the progressively shortening blade lengths caused in her efforts to close the distance. A pleased purr rumbled in the back of her throat, and she took a perverse enjoyment in a small kiss bestowed upon the other's bushy brow. A white glove left the dagger to fist ebony hair and pull it slightly back, a mouth hungrily rushing forward to claim the other's lips as her own in a split mirror rendition of her first kiss with the Grand Couturier.

She pulled back, sharpened fangs tenderly nipping at the delicate flesh of the other's neck, grazing over the pulse-point and pushing against porcelain skin, teasingly pressing against it without breaking.

Then without warning, the delinquent snarled, and the other's renewed attempt to retreat with both weapons in tow once more was met with a heavy blow courtesy of the scissor blade itself. Satsuki backed up with only one recovered blade in hand, shocked. Her injured cheek throbbed unhappily, piggybacking on the earlier injury from Ryuuko's right hook. Hands trembled almost imperceptibly to the public eye, even as she saw glittering red threads force one deep slash shut. A white gloved hand wrapped around the longer Bakuzan twin's tsuka casually, but did nothing but lightly spider thin, dexterous fingers over it, mocking the elder's nervous expression.

"To wield a blade, one must be prepared to die by it should the worst happen." it seemed to say - the debate was simply a decision of whether to execute the older sibling by situational irony or not.

A great shiver ran through the Kiryuuin elder's body at the callous display, threatening to make her drop her last line of defense against Ragyou into the gaping maw of the frigid waters below. Ominously, a low wheezing laugh escaped the younger sibling's lungs before suddenly jumping up several octaves. Sibilant and piercing, it hissed, snaking into her ears.

"Oh, Satsuki..." Her opponent whispered, releasing her grip on the white handle. Neck bones cracked as she cocked her head ever so slightly. "You're going to pay for that."

She blinked, and Ryuuko disappeared, vanishing into nothing more than a few errant puffs of wind originating where she had left. The student council President whipped around, long spidery strands of hair flying in a glorious cape behind her. Nothing.

"Behind you," came a harsh whisper, hot breath tickling her earlobe; Satsuki swore she could hear the smile in Ryuuko's voice.

And suddenly, she was. A weight dropped upon the elder sibling's back then, forcing her into a downward spiral. The raging water rushed to her, frothing white with sea foam created by the churning ship.

Ryuuko howled with laughter, yanking her sister's hair rapturously. Her heels viciously dug into Satsuki's lower back, forcing the other kamui wearer to suddenly climb hundreds of meters above sea level. She navigated the Satsuki-style surfboard away from the ship and everyone and into the heavens above, where the celestial dome met the skies and the clouds thinned into mere cottony wisps. Just as soon as it seemed like they were close enough to touch the cirrus clouds, Ryuuko moved a heel and pressed it against the small of Satsuki's neck, forcing them into a sharp plummet once more. Dark greenish blue water rushed towards them threateningly, the elder barely managing to level out before total catastrophe ensued.

Satsuki hissed as the water rapidly moving underneath burned at her bare abdomen. Ryuuko steered her along the frothing white crests, gleefully hooting as they cleared one tiny wave after another. With a sharp tug at a bang, Satsuki was forced to fly along the length of the Naked Sol, Senketsu's eye crest barely skimming the cold metal plating before being launched back into the air once more.

Ryuuko steered the elder back up towards the sky, casting a monstrous shadow on the battlers below. Satsuki grit her teeth, wincing as another tug of hair painfully reminded her of how that monstrous mockery of a mother had did the exact same thing to her too many times before in her childhood for her own sick amusement. Trying her best to ignore the screaming cacophony of ripped hair, she persevered upward, rocketing upward at a dizzying pace even as her vision doubled and blurred at the edges. Suddenly changing directions, she forced her body into a tight swerving loop, the circles tightening and growing faster and faster.

Ryuuko's weight shifted the slightest bit under the crippling inertia, and Satsuki knew then that she had the upper hand. She came out of the last loop just in time to execute a neat barrel roll and undulate wildly across the skies, successfully striking uncertainty in the heart of her opponent. Then it was just a matter of riding the air currents and quickly pulling into a steep dive. Hopefully it would be enough to dismount her sister.

It worked.

Her iron grip failed her; Ryuuko flew over and well above her sibling, speechless in that one tiny instant where the events that preceded finally caught up to her. Satsuki twirled the dagger in her hand before bringing the rounded end down and sharply cracking it against the hybrid's skull with her last bit of strength.

“Augh!”

Down Ryuuko went, her body crashing through the darkened pool of water and disappearing entirely. Only a motley assortment of frothing bubbles indicated life, and even they too grew few and far in between. Satsuki mentally apologized and sent a quick prayer for the younger's survival before speeding away to deal with the annoying loose thread of a youngest sibling. As excellent fighters the elite four were even without their starred uniform enhancements, they could not hope to survive a prolonged onslaught by the pink-clad demon. Whatever guilt she harbored for possibly drowning the only blood-kin she had been able to relate to (albeit in combat more often than not) was quickly swallowed up by the arrogant self-assurance that she would turn up again, not a life fiber-spliced hair out of place.

But still, even as she landed back on the heavily damaged ship, desynchronized with the kamui, and engaged Nui, she could not help but ponder if the ends truly justified the means.

It was a pleasure to die.

That is, to be on the cusp of life and death, teetering dangerously on the end and in a perpetual risk of falling on either side was a thrill that one could not precisely describe. To come close to death's welcoming arms, only to kiss it and coyly whisper "not today" was a pleasure in and of itself. Her spliced heart throbbed with nervous excitement. Her nerves were set aflame, rapidly exchanging electrical transmissions through axons and dendrites.

Organic bodies were on an incremental roller-coaster ride to self-destruction. Radicalization, oxidation, and the occasional pathogen in the wrong place at the wrong time all seemed on

par with the ever increasing entropic course of worldly affairs. Would it be so bad to end it on one's own terms instead of waiting for it to do their frail bodies in? Ryuuko didn't quite have an answer.

But it was cold.

That much was apparent to the girl well below sea level even with the protection of a god robe, drifting to and fro in time with the wave motions. A great blanket of water pressed against her, strangely comforting despite the enormity of the force. Small slivers of fading orange-yellow light pierced through the gloom and reached her unnaturally shaped pupils, twinkling and yet softly glowing at the same time. A trail of bubbles wormed their way through her partially opened mouth, cloyingly brushing against her cheeks and twining with loose strands of hair before drifting upward and out of sight.

It wasn't fair to say that Satsuki had defeated her in battle, for all that last blow did was temporarily stun her while thermal shock took effect. She curled into herself as best as she could with a sword stuck in her abdomen. Trimesters re-winded. Nothing but the sound of silence surrounded her. Blind and deaf, she was essentially exactly the same as an infant trapped in the watery darkness.

Streaks of red bled from the still-open wound where that traitor plunged her weapon in before effortlessly being washed away like the sands of time. Life fibers tried to stop the bleeding by enclosing the opening, even going so far as to seal the sword itself into the wound, to no avail. Her mind felt fuzzier than normal, and thoughts came disoriented and as slow as molasses. She was dimly aware of her head throbbing in agony and lungs aching for air in addition to the rather unfortunate laceration, but it seemed that here, nothing mattered at all. She smiled, genuinely and lazily, and opted instead to be swept along the currents.

Perhaps it was the lack of oxygen or simply how good Junketsu felt at the moment, but whatever inclination towards murdering the ever-living shit out of her sister dissipated and an oddly peaceful feeling overtook her.

Ryuuko suddenly choked, water filling her lungs. Spots flickered in her vision, playing at the edges. The burning in the thin tissue both complimented and contrasted sharply with her own brain screaming in agony. It was in the quiet darkness of feeling knives in her lungs and her brain (and in her stomach, who knows how long that god-forsaken thing had been lodged in there) that a tiny pull manifested itself at the back of her mind.

It was white noise at first, fading in and out of existence. The static buzzed, then manifested itself as a low humming murmur that resonated throughout her head. Although she couldn't quite discern what it was saying, somehow she understood everything at the same time. She was unsure of everything now. But the melodious sound was a voice, a distinctly feminine one at that, coated with velvety undertones and had a lilt as smooth as silk.

Perhaps it was her own voice, had she been raised on a diet of honey and nectar and trained to be soft-spoken all her life. It was both paradoxically and puzzlingly devilish and angelic in nature, and even though her thoughts tried to steer elsewhere, the voice pleasantly tickled, and her mind was helpless to resist. Its serene nature carried an undertone of deep understanding and wisdom beyond humanity's years. The siren song it inherited from its

progenitor appealed to the intellectual side of all those gifted with the ability to hear it and awoke a desire within all who heard it to make themselves wise as well and listen intently to whatever it suggested.

"Rise," the voice whispered. "Rise up and crush all that stand before you as your birthright."

She then remembered her rage. She remembered a burning, all consuming hatred of all life on this planet. Rage against being lied to and brainwashed into believing lies - lies that her mother was anything other than perfect and loving, lies fed by her worthless farce a sibling. Rage against Satsuki, against Mako, against everyone and everything in particular. It's a screaming, frothing type of anger that collapses upon itself like a black hole; a whirlwind of incomplete thoughts and broiling emotions - white noise signifying nothing. It choked her, seizing her limbs and forcing her hands to curl dangerously tight. But the voice whispered again, gently caressing her anger and directing it towards the more immediate task of life preservation, spurts of adrenaline shooting through inhuman veins.

So her limbs immediately began to go through the motions of a typical breaststroke, each powerful pushing and pulling motion bringing her ever closer to the glittering surface. Her legs kicked out from under her rhythmically, and with the force of a small hydrogen bomb detonating, Ryuuko shot out of Tokyo Bay. A grand tower of water accompanied her, a mini-tsunami lapping at her heels and cascading about in a tight vortex.

She roared then, a contempt-filled shout in defiance of life itself. Frightened seabirds previously resting on the watertop took flight, clouding the skies with their presence. And when the water calmed and her rage cooled, the cloudiness in her eyes dissipated and her senses returned. Breaths came even and natural despite the organ's desperate need for the familiar gaseous sustenance. The next thought flitted at the front of her, naturally coming to her in the quiet space between the rapidly disappearing sun and the gentle lapping of the sea.

How long had she been down there?

Grimly, she grabbed hold of the tsuka and pulled. The wakizashi slid out with a sickening squelch, and she gasped from the raw intensity of it. The polluted water stung abrasively, and god did it hurt like a bitch.

"Fuck," she hissed between clenched teeth.

Gloved hands clenched the laceration with the grip of a titan in agony, but knowing she had failed in her mission hurt worse.

Her quarry was long gone, and with it, the rest of those Nudist Beach perverts. No matter, she decided, turning the sharp blade over in her hand as the buzzing of an approaching tandem rotor helicopter grew louder. She would have plenty of time to recuperate and exact her revenge.

After all, it was hers now.

The fading light twinkled through the cracked, dirty windows of Honnouji Academy, tracing lines of orange across the dark threadbare flooring like clawed fingers on cloth. Dust and recently fallen debris choked the air and the lungs of the inhabitants within, although none paid it any significant attention. No other light graced the long-abandoned room, save for the rainbow-colored glow of the Revocs leader's hair and the soft blue aura surrounding the delinquent's body and flowing through the white kamui's cloth outlines. Rei attentively stood behind her Lady, dutifully jotting a quick note to the Grand Couturier for whenever she arrived after assessing the incomplete kamui's damage.

The boa of feathers resting on slender pale arms moved, and the other hybrid complied. A small shower of sparkling stars engulfed her, and where a soaking wet, manically grinning woman in a skin-tight outfit was, a stoic, demure one genuflecting in a militaristic uniform took her place. In another life, it could have taken the place of her worthless firstborn, if the experiment had been successful and the daughter raised in servitude to the life fibers. A minor difference, but one that could be easily corrected.

"Satsuki did this to you?" Ragyou questioned, lightly palming the healed injuries running down the younger's abdomen and tugging at the torn, jagged ends of the god robe. Ryuuko nodded, keeping her eyes averted out of respect.

Ragyou lifted the uniform's collar, and peered at the injury through the deactivated kamui's cloth opening. The raised scar was fading, albeit slower than it normally would. No matter. Within a couple of days, it would be returned to its unblemished state, and the skin would appear as if the wound had never happened.

"She got away, mother..." the hybrid quietly murmured, fingering the wakizashi and holding the bladed end oddly in her palm. Unconsciously, she gripped the blade tighter in frustration. A trickle of fresh blood from a newly opened wound serenely slid down the length of the black sword, pooled at the tip, and marred the floor. "I'm sorry I couldn't capture her like you wanted me to."

Amused, the CEO looked up from her assessment and took the longer blade before the other could further mutilate herself, wiping the blood from Ryuuko's newly cut hand onto the thickly sullied carpeting. The handle looked almost too long for a blade of its size, although it somehow conveyed a source of inner power within. A finger lazily stroked the cloth wrapping around the grip, enjoying the fine workmanship and countless hours put into its construction. The black weapon glinted, and a flash of realization passed through her.

"Bakuzan?" she questioned. The girl nodded, the prominent red streak bouncing among navy strands. "An offering of a weapon long defeated, once again proven of its worthlessness," she laughed, tossing the wakizashi back. Ryuuko deftly caught it with the bloodied hand, staining the white chords painstakingly overlaid on the tsuka's grip a deep maroon. "Keep it. A trophy, perhaps, of your fight today. You have done well in disarming that traitor."

The rainbows in her hair brightened ever so slightly, bathing the grimy interior with its radiance. Ryuuko stood up a little straighter, puffing her chest out proudly. Quite fittingly, it almost seemed her red bang brightened as well.

“Come here, my beloved child.” Ragyou smiled and lightly cupped the latter's chin with one hand. Ryuuko lovingly stared back with adoring eyes, patiently hanging onto her every word.

The ends of the matriarch's lips curled upward in a crude approximation of a loving smile.

“I have a gift for you, my dear Ryuuko.”

She turned about the waist, indicating the younger should follow her gaze. Ryuuko obeyed without hesitation, pinprick lapis blue eyes following full red ones to the shadowy corner of the room, where a deathly still dark mass of multiple eyes stared back.

“Think of it as a present for finally reuniting with your dear old mother and carrying out the will of the life fibers.”

A wolfish grin flitted across the daughter's face then, and she reached out a greedy hand. Flesh met fabric, and rough fingers gave it a once over. She laughed then, the noise airy and devoid of any emotion other than pure malice. Her teeth glinted in the multicolored spectrum's incandescence.

“It's **perfect.**”

Chapter End Notes

Junketsu mimics whatever the wearer's voice is to maintain control/increase its influence and spoke here only because life fibers become more active under existential crisis/when host is near death.

Timeline: Satsuki and Ryuuko fought, Gamagoori carpet bombed Honnouji, Ragyou and Rei noticed (This was not the mentioned event of the interlude), Rei went to retrieve Ryuuko to help the COVERS defend Shinra Kouketsu against attack, Ryuuko went underwater, and Rei rescued both Nui and Ryuuko.

Ryuuko (Int): I am Shell; I am Bone

Chapter Summary

TL;DR: A Ryuuko-centric pseudo-interlude.

Chapter Notes

Some self-harming is involved- nothing too gory or detailed, however.

They say everyone is born with a hole in their chest that they yearn to fill with their passions and beliefs. Ryuuko got hers from Ragyou's hand.

Ryuuko obediently knelt at Ragyou's feet, face soft with adoration as she looked upon that she most loved in the world.

Her creator. *Her savior.* ***Her mother.***

And she showed every bit of her devotion to who she thought a goddess by worshiping her body with her tongue, glorifying her for the righteousness of her actions. For freeing her from *dear sister's* clutches. For forever uniting her to her beloved in holy matrimony. Kisses were planted at the back of an aristocratic hand, rough lips trailing up to the hard outlines of the older woman's jaw, where she coquettishly craned it away with an amused air at her daughter's antics.

She relaxed when a hand that delivered *righteous punishment* to that treacherous sibling of hers lay flat against the crown of her head, gently pushing her back into seiza. Ryuuko calmed, settling for leaning against the blessed warmth of her legs, eager to show her devotion, her willingness to hang onto every single word she uttered, every command she made to spread the glory of the life fibers further into the world.

The palm moved to the soft of her throat, nails curling around delicate tissue. And yet the younger did not react in any other way other than the expected head tilt to expose more of the vulnerable flesh, loving expression not changing in the slightest as the skin broke and reddened, purpling under her grip.

Glossy lips pulled into a sneer at the show of absolute fealty, the continuous show of submission her youngest felt absolutely necessary to shower her with. "My dear Ryuuko," she cooed, grin widening when Ryuuko pressed up against her in anticipation, "I have a job for you."

Blue stiletto-heeled shoes rhythmically swung back and forth over the edge of a steel girder, bouncing against acid rain-streaked glass. Nui had one of her brainwashed sibling's arms in her hand, cradling and occasionally rubbing circles on it. Dawn was breaking, and although she lacked the human sense of thermoregulation, she cuddled against her "*best big sister forever*" for warmth. She rested her head on the kamui wearer's shoulder and sighed contentedly, lazily stretching her toes and warming them over the intense heat of roaring flames that licked at the building below.

Alight pieces of paper were carried out of the gaping maws of broken window panes, riding on passing air currents and landing on the streets below, where they fluttered about like dying insects and were left to burn themselves out. Ryuuko laughed, the noise airy and devoid of anything within. A maniacal grin gripped her face, and she knew that when she returned home that it would still be there. Later, going to rest an easy sleep against a filthy wall and under a ratty blanket, she would feel the fiery smile still gripped by her facial muscles in the dark. It never went away; for as long as she remembered, that smile was always lurking underneath frail skin for an opportunity to surface once more and greet the world with all its insane, toothy glory.

Thick smoke choked the air, titanic clouds of ash gray and black reaching the skies like the columns of ancient civilizations. The distinct smell of burning plastics swirled about the two, but they seemed to readily breathe the smog in, thinking it their perfume of choice. They basked in its hellish radiance, not quite caring when a blanket of soot gradually settled over them like nestling birds.

Nui faintly traced a pinky over Ryuuko's brows, and the latter relaxed, letting the youngest Kiryuuin wipe the dirt-crusting smudges around her eyes. Perhaps it was the brainwashing (it most definitely was), but something underneath her rugged exterior instinctively placed the utmost trust within the blonde. To say that she liked being doted on by Nui was the greatest understatement one could make. Few could understand their abnormal relationship, but it was an unspoken language they mastered easily.

Their hands were the hands of a conductor's, playing the symphony of destruction. Their hands chose the fate of those below them, and like gods, they guarded this privilege jealously. To be caressed by those same hands was akin to being personally blessed.

Ryuuko bit her lip and idly stretched her back, groaning in relief as bones popped back into place. A hand shook loose the strands of matted dark hair.

Had it been almost two weeks already?

Time escaped the duo easily. Some days, it would be a long string of simple raids on the town where suspected refugees were hiding, a bid to draw unsuspecting humans and scattered Nudist forces that watched over them out for consumption. Divide, and conquer. Weaken the enemy by tearing away at the bulk of their forces. Force it out of hiding by snatching up its many members, conscripting their very own soldiers against them within prison suits of life fiber cloth. Their task would be easy - breach the bunkers, flush the humans out, and herd them into the waiting jaws of the cloth-form COVERS nearby. Afterwards, they could do as they pleased and have their fun until they were personally called back or had unexpected sightings, like today. Other days, it was assisting mother with whatever life fiber-related experiments she had planned for the day.

She frowned.

Mother...

Thanks to the life fibers, her senses were honed to the point of easily detecting micro expressions and deciphering the tiniest of twitching movements. Mother was distant as of late. She was smiling a lot more recently, but Ryuuko could see through the paper-thin disguise. When she thought she wasn't looking, she saw how the CEO's brows furrowed in anger and how perfectly manicured nails flicked spastically the longer that *damned* older sister of hers kept evading her reach, as if looking for a throat or two to act as their sheaths.

At least Nui was there to make her day brighter, even if but for a moment. She wondered how to make mother happier. An idea crossed her mind, and Ryuuko visually perked up. She knew exactly how to please her.

The miniaturized Scissor blade hung from a small metal chain on her waist, tied to the black blade's tsuba. Somehow, the particular placement of the swords against her hip felt right, like she had always done so in a past life (maybe with kamui-friendly attachable pockets, she grudgingly added) perhaps.

A sudden madness seized her, and she ripped the keychain from where it was tethered, eagerly beholding it as if were the answer to all of her problems. Somewhere, she honestly believed it to be the truth. Curious, Nui lets go of her hand, almost resentfully unwinding ice-cold fingers from the soft warm flesh.

The cold blade flicked, and a small rain of red droplets marred the newly restored kamui. Again and again, it rose and fell methodically, carving out thin lines across the back of a hand, peeling back flesh and tendons to reveal shiny bone. The tiny wounds recovered faster and faster, the fibers within stitching her up without fail each time.

She must have done it at least a hundred times, she thinks, for when she stops to admire her work, there's 5 stars that don't quite touch each other, yet are close enough in their V-shaped formation to appear almost connected. She does this also to her other hand albeit more clumsily, and soon enough, she has a grand total of ten stars distributed evenly in between.

She feels artistic, she muses, choosing to sign her work with

「 鬼龍院 流子 」

under both scarred star portraits until the flesh is no longer smooth and soft to the touch. Nui scuffs her boots and twists her face at the sight she thinks uncouth and ugly, but says nothing. Ryuuko's heart seems to freeze at her conflicted expression, and a heavy feeling enters it, like she had physically attacked her little sister in some way. Her mouth feels dry as cotton, but her mind prods her to continue. So she speaks, obligated to explain the meaning to the girl next to her as the scarlet blade is once again tethered to its rivaling Gemini half.

One star means ten percent life fiber composition. Therefore, ten stars means a wholly complete life fiber configuration. Ten because she has no need for her humanity and would choose to forsake it without thought if given the opportunity to do so again. Five stars on each hand because of space constraints and to represent the duality of the alien threads as life giving and life stealing.

She doesn't quite know where a sudden rebelliousness comes from and she is not sure if she quite likes it, but she neglects to add that the groups of five seems oddly familiar to her, as if they each represented a person in her life - two groups contrasting yet complementing each other perfectly. Her tongue seamlessly weaves yet another explanation, eager to soothe the youngest's fears.

The inscription of her full name was to affirm her undying loyalty to her family and their mission, she says. She believes it true. But the different voice in the back of her head knows it partly false, knows her name not as the one she had adopted, but the one forced upon her by a treacherous man with treacherous ambitions. It wants to speak, wants to connive and rend and kill, but it holds its fibrous tongue, remaining obstinate as its master commanded.

Nui takes one look at the star-lined kanji and grins widely, and gleefully voices her support. She understands now, Ryuuko beams, and it is all the motivation she needs to resolve herself to somehow make the self-inflicted "tattoos" permanent. The bit of ash rubbed on to accentuate the ugly linear furrows would do, she believes- just until she could manage to persuade the blonde seamstress beside her to do it for her.

The flames start to eat through the roof, burning holes in the ceiling as the fire-proof coating fails to protect against the intensity of the fire. The surface under them warms uncomfortably, but they do not mind, even as the flickering orange crept closer and closer to where they sat. Windows crack and blow out under the heat, their shards twinkling and spinning midair as they fell to the ground like a morbid version of snow.

"Here comes the fun part, Ryuuko-chan," said youngest girl giggled, fingering a lithe white detonator beside her.

The device's metal casing was cracked and had entire pieces missing in several places. Still, Honnouji Academy's triangular debossed logo was still distinct, albeit gouged down its center. No doubt it was a leftover from the events that happened over a month ago - not that Ryuuko would know anything about it, anyway.

A thumb flicked the battered silver cap off and firmly pressed the red button that lay underneath. Several small explosions rocked the tower they were sitting on. Ryuuko bolted to

her feet although Nui remained still, almost eerily calm despite knowing fully well exactly what she did. A great plume of dark smoke and dust burst from the shattered windows, tumbling to the ground below like an urban avalanche, a great cascade of smoky lava and tongues of fire.

The building shuddered, and then toppled over with a metallic groan, shedding its exterior paneling in a thick rain of concrete dust and steel. Ryuuko's heels ran the length of the smooth painted surface of the roofing, going along with the flow of the tipping building. A second series of explosions rang out and then a third as the buildings in front of the duo started to crumble as well.

One by one, the skyscrapers fell like dominoes, the remote detonations planned as to make the transitions as smooth as possible. Ryuuko casually slid along the sloping rooftop before moving onto the next falling one, holding Nui in her hands bridal-style.

Lines of charges detonated one after another, and the morbid urban surfing continued until the last building deposited them onto a patch of asphalt. A clear-cut linear path of destruction was left in their wake, an easy indicator of their recent presence to enemy forces. Ryuuko glared at the blonde, who could only manage a nonchalant shrug in her rather cramped position. The red-streaked girl huffed in irritation, and adjusted her grip.

"Come on. We still have one last job to do."

"They're kind of cute, don't you think?" Nui cooed, running her hands repeatedly over the human-form suit's crest.

Ryuuko hummed in agreement, ears pricked intently for any sound of movement. Junketsu pulsed in time with her heartbeat, intermittently twitching the slightest bit, impatient to be truly put on again and fed blood. Ryuuko quieted it with a small stroking of her own before turning her attention back to the clearing, and its complaints soon regressed into quiet purring. Even with the boosted senses afforded by the kamui, the few humans remaining were becoming quite skilled in masking almost every sign of their presence, whether they chose to use the white noise of dams or the cover of rain.

She walked the length of the field, stalking like a lioness hunting prey in the savannas. Nui watched her with great interest, eyes tracking her hypnotizing movements. Ryuuko never ceased to amaze her, and she loved every second she spent with her. Ryuuko tapped the corners of the grassy knoll before moving inward, stopping at random intervals to repeat the process over and over. When she was satisfied, she stood in the general area where the land rang most hollow and the quiet shuffling the loudest.

She breathed deeply, letting the cool damp air fill her lungs. Her nose twitched. Nostrils flared, and caught wind of the pungent odor of the unwashed masses.

There!

She lightly struck the edge of her favored weapon against the ground, and the earth shattered against its touch, tearing itself away from the epicenter as if consciously aware of the person

standing atop it. Grass and dirt blew away to reveal a cramped hideaway roughly hewn into the hilltop and poorly enforced by steel wire supports. A muted silence hung in between them, with the near-naked huddled masses paired with glazed eyes and too-weak breaths.

Emaciated and sickly, they were barely fit for the consumption of the life fibers. Still, they were valuable sources of energy for the alien threads, and not a single morsel was to be wasted, even if they were on the cusp of death. Nui hung back, content just to observe this time around instead of toying with them as she normally was wont to do.

"It's them!"

Several terrified cries answered his, and the small crowd pushed to the furthest recesses of the concrete bunker. Ryuuko assertively stepped forward, squarely putting herself in between their escape route. Several valiantly tried to squeeze past her on their hands and knees, figuring their numbers would quickly assure that the majority would flee unharmed. However, they were quickly snatched up by red threads as thin as a human hair dangling in the air and devoured.

The remaining chose to press themselves as far as they could against the stained wall and broken stone. The hybrid stepped further in, and they scrunched into themselves further with every step punctuated with sharp heel cracks. A man a little fuller and more muscled than the rest, no doubt a father of many, suddenly stood up, clutching in his shaking hands an unopened can of miso mackerel.

He threw the canned good at the uniformed girl as he would the opening pitch for his team, and was entirely surprised when she deftly caught it with a bored expression on her face and crushed it easily. Dropping the ruined remains of the foodstuff, she wrapped her fingers around his neck, effectively stopping the rest of the group behind him from attacking her with a single withering look.

"Please, don't take us," he croaked, coughing from the exertion of trying to speak while his windpipe was simultaneously being crushed. "Please... I have a family."

Ryuuko tipped her head and regarded him with plain indifference. He gulped nervously, finding nothing remotely human left in her strangely shaped eyes.

The hand roughly tightened, and he whimpered like a kicked puppy as he was hefted into the air.

"Please," he moaned, hands pawing at hers.

She smiled wolfishly, face crinkling in wicked delight. Lips pulled up into thin lines, bared fanged teeth appearing demonic in origin. With an airy, gleeful laugh, she threw him up and over the wrecked entrance of the safe house, watching idly as his body spun and twisted midair in frantic movements.

A suit hanging by a single slender thread sensed his heartbeat, and immediately darted towards him. A thin vertical line blossomed along the front of the suit, a jaw magically

appearing out of nowhere to swallow him whole. At once, the flat suit gained definition, muscles and ridges seemingly bursting out of the cloth in the blink of an eye.

She observed the newly created gathering of fed COVERS, briskly turning on her heel. She didn't bother to watch as the hungry clothing filled the broken remains of the bunker. From her vantage point, she saw the gloriously wonderful sight of the city burning below her. Nui came to stand beside her, and words unsaid were exchanged through knowing looks and butterfly touches that danced but did not encroach further. The new platoon of human-form clothing stood attentively behind her in neat rows, awaiting her command like soldiers to a general. Ryuuko stared contemplatively, letting the wind tousle the lengthening mop of hair.

Truly this was the dawn of a new era.

Her form rests heavily upon the throne that her sibling once perched herself on, slightly hunched over with legs crossed at the knees and chilled fingers tented against each other, shattered remains of an ornate bone china teacup looped around a finger. The dust-choked fabric cups her weary form and soothes it with subtle massages every time she moves against it, molding itself around her to best caress she who wore the fiber-god's given glory upon her shoulders. Light choked by the heavy curtain of clouds that had become so prevalent lately dances upon her still body. Her face is screwed up in consternation, eyes closed and face hidden under the filthy mop of unruly hair. The red streak gracing her rugged features maintains its glaring contrast to the muted background, glowing softly amid its midnight-blue bathed brethren.

She breathes, smoke escaping parted lips in the declining weather and curling past a reddened face to intermingle with the frosty air above, and swivels the chair to face the towering set of windows behind, overlooking the deserted campus beneath the massive tower's shadow. In another time, thousands would be milling the courtyard in massive throngs, faceless and yet not faceless to the ruler lording over their lives. But now, in the wake of a post-human world, it was not thousands of people, but thousands of living clothes that moved below. Ryuuko straightens, letting the ruined china clatter to the floor in soft tinkling melodies as she rises to stride over to the glass separating this world from the one that lay outside. Breath fogs the cracked and somewhat shattered glass with every exhale, sharp blue hues examining the detritus and stripping the massive complex of concrete and steel away with heated glares. Drifting white suits float on by, briefly acknowledging her superiority with a curt bow before continuing their mindless tasks. She frowns, letting her hand dance atop the scarlet blade and freeze atop the unfeeling surface.

A queen. A Kiryuuin.

All hail the Kiryuqueen.

Heel clacks muted in the thick carpeting, she moves away from the light, letting the shadows wash over her like a cleansing veil.

"Find any spare resources Satsuki might have hidden away," the command came five days after she returned, frilly pink satanic seamstress in tow and comfortably curled in her arms. "Leave nothing untouched."

The order arrived in the wake of the destruction of the remote satellite transmitter tower that the COVERS constructed in the academy's courtyard. Desperate for supplies (although she hid it well), Ragyou ordered the Japanese mainland to be stripped clean before dipping her feet into international waters, where more than a semblance of resistance remained despite the more than unhealthy amount of COVERS assaulting their shores. Ryuuko rifled around the office previously occupied by the prestigious Student Council, having found nothing remotely useful anywhere else in the last thirteen hours. Such was her boredom that she had taken to once again seating herself upon her sister's empty throne, heels kicking against the carpeting and forcing the furniture to spin with wild abandon.

A wall of computers sat blank, their screens dark and foreboding. Very little light finds its way up here, and the room is dark and gloomy with the sun now beginning its celestial descent. Hard drives already stripped and marked to be sent back to the mansion for analysis, she bypasses them without a second thought, using a bamboo sword she found while pillaging through the lower floors as a back scratcher. At least one of the towers containing the devices had been shoved away into a corner and oddly didn't appear to be connected to a power strip despite the machines around it showing age-old marks of heavy use.

Curious. Absolutely curious.

Papers framed by an ungodly amount of various stuffed toys spilled onto surprisingly pristine flooring as the delinquent crash-landed on one of the plush pink couches that sat near Satsuki's former throne for some reason. A red bang bounced as she peered over the edge of the sofa to stare at it.

"'Adante's Waltz (Adagissimo, in D-minor)', by Nonon Jakuzure" it read.

Her stomach rumbled unhappily, and Ryuuko's face hitched in slight disgust. Between running errands for mother and searching for Satsuki, she hadn't eaten for several days now. In fact, thanks to the coma the sudden trauma of having her heart ripped out in the wake of a revelation induced, it was over a month and a half since she last ate, although she didn't know it, couldn't possibly know it. The only chance she had was quickly ruined when Nui decided that 'accidentally' falling and slapping her bowl of gameni to the floor was hilarious. The black notes on the glaringly white paper beckoned to her. Her stomach panged again, and her face was marred by a flash of pain. Her mouth watered against her wishes, and she swore silently. It would have to do.

Ryuuko crammed the page into her mouth, idly chewing. The bland taste of wood pulp was soon offset by the faintest trace of bleach, and she gagged. Soon the entire piece, painstakingly written and edited by the local troll herself over the course of an entire year, was nothing more than a mere memory. The hybrid coughed once, a scrap of paper freeing itself to land on the sofa below.

"We are superior beings above ordinary humans. We should not have to live like animals," the voice proclaims within her with barely concealed contempt, and Ryuuko whips her head furiously in agreement even though she knows that it is aware of everything she thinks and does.

Purity is its name, but purity it is not, for once it has bound itself to Ryuuko, it could not help but unwittingly take in its new owner's personality with it. Proud and arrogant in its power it has become, and rightfully so, for the latest endeavors against the scattered resistance forces have proved fruitful. It thinks and she acts, and soon all those that stood in their way bend their knees to them in supplication.

"There are much easier ways to achieve life fiber domination. We should - "

"We *should* follow what mother demands," she growls, but the kamui notes with a certain satisfaction that she is not entirely convinced.

She is more than famished and it is easily noticed in her blood, where the bountiful supply of nutrients is drying up in trickles. Still, her strength does not falter, and the god robe knows why Ragyou had chosen to deprive her favored daughter of sustenance. Their close connection grows ever stronger with every passing day, no small thanks in part to their intertwined fibers. Even now they pulsed vibrantly with life, the stress of never-ending work and a potentially weakened host forcing them to the peak of their power.

"Mother - "

She stiffens at the same time as Junketsu does, feeling a distant part of their senses awaken and flare up in a raging inferno. The tingling that rattles the very threads of their cores grows more strained with every passing second. It is something that they have only felt in passing before, but never has it been so strong until this very moment. Four eyes narrow at the same time, understanding easily flowing between them. It's that abomination and - !

"Satsuki."

It is Junketsu this time that restrains her, stills her limbs as they abandon the bamboo blade and reach for her own. Her muscles strain and pull against the kamui's hold, but slacken in submission once a greater ripple of pleasure runs through her flesh.

"We must inform our superiors," her own voice chides from within, calm and collected.

Ryuuko glances towards the direction of the disturbance through the panoramic window, mind turning over the thought of hunting both kamui and bearer down. A heel firmly snaps down against the tiling, easily shattering it and sending black spider webs racing through the stiff material. In the time span less than that of a blink of an eye, a conversation is exchanged and a decision is reached. The kamui practically purred in delight as its host capitulated to its will, rewarding her with an extra flood of dopamine and enjoying the short, breathy moan that arrives as a response. Giving one last look at the dilapidated room, she straightens her skirt, snorts, and leaves, taking the miserable box of stolen goods with her.

"I'm home," she roared, kicking the door open. The thick wood groaned as it swung on rusting hinges and fell to the ground with a floor-trembling crash.

Home was never the same place for any consecutive series of nights. She preferred travelling in between, switching between the plentiful one and two-star housing that populated the

lower sectors of Honnou Town by random choice in case *Satsuki* foolishly showed up to try retaking her kingdom from mother by surprise. No matter where she went, however, they always managed to find her, managing to tail her even as she wandered down alleys and dizzyingly twisted stretches of roads on a whim. Ryuuko was sure they had bugged her- it wouldn't be unlike them to have done so.

But did she care?

Not in the slightest.

A hand mindlessly scraped against a peeling wall, carelessly rubbing away old and drooping paint that sagged and parted ways with the chalky material. The darkness greeted her as she walked further and further in, but she knew better than to assume that the room was empty. Her assumption proved correct when she heard something slither across the floor and wrap its arms around hers from behind. Her breath hitched as its owner pushed her face in between her head and shoulder and gently nipped at her ear.

"Welcome home," came the response.

Ryuuko leaned back, relaxing in the muscular hold she had come to know and become familiar with. Hair the color of the ocean below and straightened to perfection spilled upon her breast and tangled with the many tassels on Junketsu's epaulettes. She sniffed, inhaling the other's scent deeply. Immediately, a sharp tang hit her, and her nose scrunched up in disgust.

Kerosene.

"Mother says you shouldn't be playing with fire. She won't be too happy that you smell."

"Mmm," the ever eloquent reply came. "Says the girl that can't even take a proper bath."

Ryuuko's teeth sunk into the sailor fuku-clothed shoulder in reproof, the sharpened enamel easily piercing through the thin fabric. There was a short cry of outrage, accusations made in disgust that a Kiryuuin should know better than to bite others like a common animal. They fought and punched, rolling about on the hardwood, but there was no true malice in their actions.

Their bodies crashed through rotted floorboards made worse by rampant water damage and tumbled into a flooded floor below. Chunks of rubbery paint and moldy plaster fell with them, stirring the dirty green water and forming muddy brown swirls on the surface. They both went underwater, hands grasping and shooting past each other several times before finally connecting and digits interlocking.

Ryuuko opened her eyes, finding in the murky gloom navy wisps so alike hers radiating outward from a face shadowed by the little light. There was a tug, and she was pulled upward. Their heads breached the surface, and Ryuuko gladly took a gasp of air, strangely quite at peace. For a moment, they relaxed in the water's stilling surface, just mindful of the other's presence amid lazy attempts at treading water.

She peered into icy blue eyes, and was not entirely surprised to find that hers, mirrored in the glassy orbs, lacked the same pigmentation.

Carefully, she brought a hand to the other's pale cheek and cupped it lovingly, letting her fingers twine with the dark cerulean-colored strands. As vain as it sounded, she really could have stared at her own reflection in the other's eyes forever. Her own eyes glimmered with the faintest trace of excitement as she drunk in the sight.

They were red.

Souichirou (Int): Isshin. Ryuu.

Chapter Summary

TL;DR: Isshin/Souichirou has a crisis of consciousness. A look into the machinations of the mind of a regretful father.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Men that live in fibrous houses should not swing sword scissors.

Red.

That was the color of life-blood and life fibers. Of the dust and fabric that lay beneath your feet and in the air as machines hummed and autonomously weaved together yet another prototype. Of anger and passion, twin forces that frequently interlocked hands and entwined fates, no matter the circumstance. Of her peculiar eyes, torn bedraggled clothing, and the singular curved bang that curled around her little patch of hair. There were more of them that weren't part of the singular mass, of course, but they preferred to hide behind the forest of navy blue, as if self-aware of their intruding presence.

You've grown to love her and terribly fear her- *almost*, for those piercing unnaturally colored irises were so much like those of your former wife. Sometimes, when you were quietly sipping your tea after a long day of research, you stared out the mansion's large windows and thought about them as Ryuuko silently napped on your lap with her stuffed pig clutched in her fat little hands. They made you wonder if Ragyou was very much like this when she was younger. Was she a life-fiber infused hybrid before she was even two months old, like Ryuuko? Who did this to her? Did she have those same eyes, albeit without the gear-shaped pupils? What about her hair, which fanned from her head in impossible shapes and colors without the use of dyes or fixatives?

A sudden thought intruded on your mind as the four year old slumbered on, unaware of her parent's dilemma. Carefully, you replaced the cup on its saucer and set it down on the table.

What if she would grow up to be another Ragyou?

Impossible! You almost dismissed the thought as quickly as it came. It came back with a biting venom. Her hair had already started to fill out around her ears nicely and took after your hair coloring (before you dyed it silvery white to appease that devil-woman several

years ago, of course) as well. It grew in uneven tufts and gave her a rough but charming look. Somehow, it even defied gravity, managing to prick upward despite its mass.

You blamed Ragyou's genes for this.

But the ever-present thick, bold red streak of life fiber infused hair gave away any other semblance of normalcy she could have in life even more so. It pained her greatly if it was pulled, and no dye could sufficiently hide the alien threads that made up the bang. An oddity to others, perhaps, but a situation that often hovered between life and death for both of you if a latent trace of any life fiber material were to be exposed to the outside world, to *her* and the entirety of her conglomerate. So you saved up every strand of hair felled every time you attacked the mismanaged mane, careful to discard them into an incinerator. Again, you couldn't be too careful- you didn't need *another* assassination attempt before your project was completed, and the one you had just recently was one too many.

Unconsciously, your free hand stroked Ryuuko's hair- anything that could get your mind off of that fateful night and the other daughter you regretfully had to leave behind. You creased your graying brow and adjusted your fake eyepatch out of a force of habit. Damn that woman.

Sometimes, when you slipped out of the disguise and stretched your limbs after a tedious day of experimentation, you wondered if the red bang was a result of a concussion there on the way down the disposal shaft. Life fibers did strengthen their host in the face of mortal peril, after all. But who could say that she was a perfectly even split between life fibers and a human?

Curious now, you turned her over roughly, ignoring her squalled cries of disapproval. The line of simple 'X' or star-shaped scars from that experiment so many years ago was still there, albeit faded from age. You sighed in relief and held her a bit closer. Good. She was still too human, still discordant with the same threads of fate that kept her alive after the fall so many years ago.

Her red eyes sparkled unhappily with unshed tears. You winced at the sight, choosing to kiss her forehead gently and dab her eyes with the corner of your lab coat. They stared deep into yours, almost making you feel as if you were stripped down to your very soul. You shuddered under her very gaze.

So you sent her away as soon as she was old enough to attend boarding school.

Not because of her eyes, of course. That reason alone would have been too trivial. Besides, the anti-life fiber serum you had made in secret with stolen funds from Revocs had practically run its course after countless trials and injections. No longer its piercing sangria, it had faded back to its original vibrant azure before that fateful day where you left her on the elementary school's steps.

Maybe one day she would understand. Until then, you would assign guardianship of her to the boarding schools and have her remotely monitored by a rookie Nudist Beach operative of your choosing.

Now alone in the mansion, which seemed too giant, too empty for one person to fill by themselves, you sighed and tossed away another half-finished project. Perhaps one day you could explain it all to her, when she was older. But for now, there was work to be done, and a paramilitary force to be strengthened.

You weren't a drinker, but that didn't stop you from opening a bottle of finely aged wine, pour it into a small glass, and sip from it. You weren't a wine connoisseur, but that didn't stop you from downing the rest of the small bottle over the night's stay.

Mind swimming in drink, all you could do now was lie back in the softest chair you owned and drown yourself in the memories.

It was raining.

You remembered because you had felt each raindrop hit you like anvils as you fled the mansion to the car you stashed a few blocks away. An infant Ryuuko safely nestled in your hand, she slumbered on, unaware of the trauma that she had barely escaped from. You had been tasked with incinerating her body shortly after, but to your surprise, you had found her not just alive, but thriving. So you hid her, guilty of your transgressions and feeling the weight of your past mistakes hit you with the force of a speeding train.

You admitted to thinking of killing her upon discovery, fearful of what Ragyou might do once she discovered that there was another like her. You then thought of Satsuki and the time you spent with her, and your hand miraculously stayed. After more than an hour of deliberation, you decided your quest to rob the Revoc's CEO of her life should not deprive this baby of her life as well.

It was difficult enough maintaining the illusion of her death after that vile demon of a woman had subjected her to synchronization experiments just mere hours after her birth while you contacted your small group of friends. Such difficulty increased when you and one other decided to smuggle her away under the influence of a sedative in one week - having her awake would just leave a gaping opportunity for Ragyou to discover she lived and snatch her up for her own with eagle-sharp talons. You had the displeasure of having to continuously drug her before your run, each time hoping that the dose you gave her would be just enough to keep her quiet without killing her again.

You were no doctor, but you would have admitted to administering the drug to her before when her cries threatened to permeate the hidden safehouse lying underneath the mansion. Every night while you lay beside your sleeping wife, you stayed awake, ears pricked and mind too on edge to rest. If she noticed your lack of energy and general discomfort, she didn't say anything about it, attributing it to nothing more than weak human emotions grieving for "a worthless child".

Nothing but the passing patches of light from the streetlamps above guided your way to the meetup spot. You, of course, knew where you were going, even as the path led deep into the heart of the forest and miles away from the rest of civilization. You were sure you broke more than a couple posted speed limits that night, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but Ryuuko now.

Your trusted informant met up with you at the stroke of two, and you pressed the babe into his hands carefully, almost wistfully watching her rub her eyes and snooze on undisturbed.

"Take care of her," you had growled, your voice warning of a very painful death should anything happen to her while in his care.

"I won't let you down," he had promised, hurriedly whisking them both away with one sweep of his lab coat.

You stood in the driving rain until your clothes were dripping wet and the freezing liquid chilled you to your bones. Already you missed her dearly.

"Osaka," you said, shaking your head at her attempts to speak.

"Hosaki," she warbled, a fist in her mouth and a stuffed pig in her hand.

"No, no, no. *Osaaaaakaaaaa*,"

"-Osa... Hoi... Sasts... saka... sasuki... sa... hosa... Hoisiii sawa."

Dumbfounded, you sat back. Kinue wasn't lying when she said that Ryuuko's hobby was somehow climbing up to the countertop and watching her cook. Apparently, the sticky brown condiment was her favorite thing to add to everything the older Kinagase sister prepared, and it was one of the first words she spoke during the latter's tenure as a surrogate mother. Now, "hoisin sauce" was Ryuuko's default answer to everything.

You shrugged, and decided to play with her again instead of continuing the lesson, putting an aged hand over her questioning eyes.

"Peekaboo," you've said, uncovering her eyes to reveal your true form for the second time that day, much to her squealing delight.

It had been approximately four years since you left her in the care of the Kinagase siblings, your informant, and Aikuro. It wasn't until now that you had the chance to visit her, playing the loyal lapdog to the Kiryuuin clan for your survival - and hers. Now that they thought you dead, you had all the time in the world to catch up with her. Apparently, the game was her favorite, next to hide and seek.

You could only imagine an increasingly frustrated Tsumugu tearing down room after room in an attempt to find where she had crawled into after she seemed to disappear in the split second he looked away, only to discover that she was with his sister all this time. Kinue had the grace of a sixth sense and the patience of a saint bestowed upon her, and it showed in how easily she located the squirming toddler and somehow knew how to pacify her every time.

You were surprised when she had tapped your hand almost indignantly when you moved to cover her eyes again and change back to the elderly scientist visage you had adopted. You couldn't help but burst into peals of laughter at the scene, even as her face melted into a rather grumpy expression.

She was so much like Satsuki in every way, and yet so different. Both of them possessed a determined drive, even if Ryuuko's tended to lean more into the territory that got her into trouble for looking and playing with things she really shouldn't have (the cigar lighter incident notwithstanding). However, while Satsuki was more analytical and preferred to hang back until she was sure that she perfectly understood the situation from all angles, Ryuuko was a wildfire of emotions and actions and gleefully leapt into the jaws of danger at every given chance. You imagined it was probably because she fancied herself tearing out danger's throat with her own teeth, even if her goal was just to steal another cookie from the jar you tried hiding behind fruit and vegetables.

Bathtime was always enjoyable when Ryuuko actually calmed down and let herself be cleaned after a long day of flooding your garden and playing in the mud. Even though she had the nasty habit of shaking her mop of hair and spraying you with a torrent of sweet-smelling bubbles like a wet dog, you didn't pay it any mind. Fatherhood was all about adjusting to these kinds of small transitions, after all.

Too bad you couldn't have kept her with you forever.

When you went to sleep at dawnbreak, having spent more than the night trying to get a hyperactive Ryuuko to bed, running experiments on stolen life fibers, and compiling dizzying amounts of data into your research notebook, dreams of life fibers filled your head. You couldn't get the images out of your mind, no matter how hard you tried or how much drink you imbibed.

Admittedly, it was more of your love for her than the hounding visions that drove you to be outright indifferent around her, even though it pained your heart to see her terribly unhappy. After a couple more sporadic moments of father-daughter bonding, you really couldn't remember other times where you had been so close like that for fear of getting too attached to her. You didn't even remember doing anything for her next two birthdays or any major holiday observed by the Japanese public at large. It just seemed like work swallowed you whole and refused to spit you back out.

So you left her to her own devices for the most part. It was just easier for her to hate you. Maybe she would find inner peace with that resolution until the very day you would call her back and show her everything. The last thing that came to your questing mind for other recollections was the day you had gotten photographed with her immediately right before you dropped her off, likely never to see her again.

It seemed like the life fibers themselves were determined to keep you apart forever.

Now, with the dampening effects of the alcohol wearing off, you saw those same threads dancing before you. Taunting you. Running through your daughter's blood, intermingling freely with her cells and the core of her being. Vision spinning and fading at the edges, all you saw was red before everything went black and your mind quieted.

Red life-blood. Red bangs. **Red eyes.**

The red strings of fate that were the life fibers.

Red, red, red.

Chapter End Notes

I approximated Ryuuko to be about 6-7 when he left her at boarding school, since it is approximately that age in which kids her age attend that level of schooling (or so Wikipedia says for Japanese schooling grades and the student's approximate age). Yeah, I know. Wikipedia...

II: The Garden of Eden

Chapter Summary

TL;DR: Ryuuko becomes friends with a gigantic ball of yarn.

Chapter Notes

This officially begins Arc II of the story, Owari. Mild violence and torture present later on in the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Some are born great. Some have greatness thrust upon them. For Ryuuko, it was unwillingly the latter, in the form of Junketsu.

Her body crashed hard against the arena flooring. Dirt roughly pushed into nostrils upon impact, and she snorted harshly to clear her airways. Body aching and riddled in more bruises than she cared to count, she could only manage to pull herself into a cobra-like position, the upper half barely rising off the ground before a persistent shaking set in. She collapsed ungracefully, fighting off the intense urge to vomit. Her vision spun wildly, edges phasing in and out of each other like passing ghosts. Dark gray heels gradually swam into view, the pointed ends stopping just short of her nose.

"Get up," a cool female voice intoned, bored and monotonous.

Ryuuko debated. On one hand, her stubborn will refused to let her quit. On the other hand, the sparring match had gone on for way too long, and her battered form really couldn't take too much more of this. Pretending to submit and then later locking her opponent in a headlock seemed like the best course of action at the time - pride be damned.

A foot sharply dug into her side once, then again when the smaller girl's body didn't move. The latter coughed, a shower of frothy white and red decorating the newly-cracked wooden flooring as her insides burned.

"Get. Up."

A stiletto slammed against the back of her head, pushing her into the ground again. The former no-star choked, weakly gasping for air. Fingers scratched at the ground in vain. The voice came again, now riddled with impatient annoyance.

"I said, '**get up**'."

"Fuck... you..." Ryuuko hissed between her teeth. Blood pooled at the corners of her lips and dribbled down her chin.

Powerful fingers soon grasped at a wad of hair, and Ryuuko's head jerked up involuntarily, fiery red eyes meeting toxic green ones framed by impossibly golden hair. The ex-delinquent fumed, her scowl deepening as the other smirked.

"Weakling. What an amazing feat it must have been to stand against that no-good sister of yours. What good are you to the Kiryuuin name if you can't even defend yourself without the help of that kamui of yours?"

"But you... get to... use... yours?" Ryuuko wheezed, more of the vibrant red marring her swelling face.

The grip on her hair tightened and pulled upward ever more. A clenched fist drove into her abdomen, violently racking battered ribs. The red-streaked teen hacked. Ashen gray skin moved as its owner took the opportunity to teasingly rub a curled hand against her chin as if honestly thinking it over.

"Hm... yes. As amusing as toying with you without grossly overpowered strength afforded by a kamui is, this is much more satisfying."

Ragyou's daughter spat the wad of blood collecting in her mouth at those same green eyes, satisfied when her hair was released and her body was dropped back onto the ground. A small blast of agony equivalent to that of a gunshot going off bounced around in her chest, but the pain was better than being held up like a soon-to-be-dissected lab rat. She looked up, finding the other still preoccupied with wiping off the bright scarlet fluid. Thinking swiftly, she wrapped a hand around the nearest ankle, pulling with the last of her strength.

Soon, her opponent was brought down to the ground with her, and a short scuffle ensued. The taller girl slammed Ryuuko onto her back then immediately assumed a mounting position, kneeling above the latter's pelvis while straddling her waist with her legs. Dark-clothed hands then effortlessly pinned white-covered ones above a red-streaked head.

"What a familiar position," she snickered, leaning forward and appraising the rapidly darkening blush marring the middle Kiryuuin sibling's face. "Do I make you uncomfortable, Ryuuko? I thought we were well past that stage already."

Ignoring the stabbing pains that accompanied the movement, Ryuuko bucked and bumped chests, pleased when she noted a shift in the other's balance. She moved her hips, then pelvic thrust again, making the motion fluid and abrupt enough to fully break the other's lower hold on her. Her own legs now freed, she wrapped them around the taller girl's waist, twisting

her lower half so that she was now on top. A head sharply cracked against the surface as Ryuuko deftly rolled her so that other's stomach pressed against the dirtied wood.

"Better luck next time," Ryuuko grinned, twisting the gray-clad girl's arm behind her back with newly-freed hands and sickly relishing the pops and creaking groans faux bones made.

A palm lightly tapped against the bamboo inlays, and Ryuuko let up, rolling her weight off the other girl so both of them lay on the ground, now facing in each other in a shared moment of silence. Chests heaved in perfect synchronicity, great shuddering breaths filling great shivering bodies.

"Nee-san," the shorter girl murmured without thinking, and their bodies drew together. Heartbeats bounced off each other, effortlessly filling the silent space between.

Safe within dark-clad arms, Ryuuko closed her eyes, green ones surrounded with similarly colored scleras following soon after.

The heat of the baths uncomfortably brushed up against Ryuuko's skin, causing no small amount of sweat to bead and bleed into the military-esque clothing. She panted, not resisting in the slightest as an arm was suddenly wrenched upward and the exposed skin harshly scrubbed. Satsuki (and yet, not Satsuki, the hybrid supposed) ministered to her, filling the shallow pool of water with scented soaps and letting them soak into the bound kamui. Despite being over seventeen years her senior and lacking any type of familiar relation by blood or other means, it had felt natural to call her "big sister". She looked like Satsuki (permanent color shift after the transformation aside), but was everything she wasn't- clones made from the terrified imprinted memories of dozens of worthless no-stars tended to be like that.

Rei and Nui spoiled her. Instead of just leaving her with a substitute big sister, they also let her have clones of her traitorous older sister's friends as well. In a sense, she had been promoted to a general of sorts, leading the charge against the last remaining resistance of humanity as the life fibers grew ever closer to their goal. Sometimes, she likened it to being designated as a heavenly herald of what was to come, and a genuine smile of sorts would soon blossom afterward.

Seas of foam soon filled the expensive stone inlay of the room, bubbles drifting in the air like something out of a dream. Ryuuko sighed as the heat soothed the many new bruises she had sustained, nuzzling against the other's chest. It felt good to have a shared experience with another who could also not take off her clothing, she thinks, letting the grime detach from the white cloth with a light massage and swirl around in the muddying waters. In the rapidly growing mist that grows from the steam swirling about them, the soft golden radiance the color-swapped girl has provided does not diminish, even without the added effect of her activated 'kamui'. While in battle they were as unrelenting as the storms of the sea or the waters of a typhoon, they were as gentle as night breezes outside of it, babying each other sometimes to the other's delight.

"Akiko."

The clone paused in her work, a golden eyebrow quirking upward in slight bemusement.

"Your name," Ryuuko repeated, "is Akiko."

A scoff of amusement. "Not Satsuki?"

A short bark of laughter in response. "No. Can't have you named after that *filth*. A true Kiryuuin doesn't stab their mother in the back or betray the life fibers."

Her response came swift and clipped, as crisp as freshly ironed clothing. "Then I am honored by your decision and accept that name."

Ryuuko nodded as much as her range of movement allowed, neck willingly exposed as Akiko's hands rubbed luxurious shampoo into her untamed mane. Even with the copious amounts of the white goop applied directly to her hair, the bright red bang still managed to poke its way out, as if consciously defying every attempt to mask its presence.

"I honestly thought about naming you 'Mikako' or 'Suzume'. 'Kimiko' came up quite a bit as well."

"What about the others?" A warm stream of water splashed onto Ryuuko's face, washing the suds away in streams of foamy white and rainbow-streaked bubbles.

"Eh, they are yours to do with as you please. I bet if you name them after the filth stuck to your boots after a trek into the city, they'll accept it without question."

They remained silent, Ryuuko briefly ducking under the hot water to wash off any lingering traces of soap. When she surfaced, she found Akiko holding out a white robe to her, face impassive.

"Mother wanted to see you today as soon as you're finished. She stressed that it was of the utmost importance and that you shouldn't delay, even though we got extra... vigorous with our session today."

"Carry me." Ryuuko demanded, flopping onto the bath's marble steps. "You owe me after that stunt you pulled today." The lumpy mass of Turkish cotton hit her in the face instead. Feet padding softly on the stone tiling indicated the taller girl's departure.

"Tch. Carry yourself, *imouto*."

Prim and proper. That was how she had to act for mother, because mother loved her and wanted the very best for her, so it was only fair on her end that she should be the most loyal daughter in the world, even if it meant dying in her stead. Mother must have been terribly hurt after Satsuki's betrayal, so Ryuuko endeavored to more than make up for it, even though she knew through her memories that she had already done so just by sticking by her side and defending her from attack.

Her back straightened without her knowledge, as did her overall posture. Her shoulders were pushed back, and her head held up high, framed by strands of now shoulder-length hair.

Every step was precise, calculated, punctuated loudly and rhythmically even though it took nearly all her strength just to remain upright. Even when covered in a simple fluffy robe, she looked like she could kill a man using only the ties. She believed it true. Morbidly, she wanted a human pig to appear before her so she could try it herself and see how fast their life left their disgusting, pitiful body.

She squinted her eyes, pupils struggling in the relative darkness to gain purchase and identify what lay within. The room was empty save for mounted computer monitors on the walls, an indistinct machine attached to the ceiling, and a lone metal table sitting in the middle of the interior. And of course, to the side of the room almost hidden near the doorway, was Rei and her mother.

"Strip."

The soft white robe fluttered to the ground without complaint. An unspoken command rang volumes in the silence, and the still-wet teen obediently lay on the table, abdomen against the steel and shivers cold metal caused dampened skin repressed.

She did not know it, but this chamber held hundreds before her, hundreds that suffered and died within these walls, hundreds that had their bodies sliced open and examined, fibers shoved into them in the interest of discovering the perfect conditions for hybridization. Hundreds that were processed like cattle in secret by scientists working tirelessly, even after Kiryuuin Souchirou was eliminated and their original venture remained far out of their grasp.

Thick metal cuffs sprang from the table and snugly fit themselves around her wrists, elbows, mid-back, knees, and ankles as soon as she lay in position. Ragyou hushed Ryuuko gently as the latter gave a surprised shout, the secretary busying herself with preparing the various instruments within the disused experiment chamber even as the hybrid daughter tested her steel bonds tentatively. She attached a small device to the younger hybrid's finger, a cloth cuff to a tricep, and small sticky pads onto the little exposed skin, soon joining the latter group with electrodes hooked up to a boxy machine. A quick tap on a keyboard later, and Ryuuko's vitals soon showed up on the clunky monitors- blood pressure, oxygenation levels, and all.

Something caught her eye.

Ragyou turned the former delinquent's hands over, inspecting the roughly hewn design. Initial surprise vanished, and her expression melted into a neutral one as long nails brushed over the raised flesh.

"You made these?"

Ryuuko guiltily averted her eyes. What seemed like a good idea at the time was now slapping her in the face with the weight and strength of her own naive stupidity. She broke out in a cold sweat, fingers turning wet and clammy under the psychological pressure of her own duress. Her voice came out muted.

Weak.

Pitiful.

"Y-yes."

"Hmm..."

The elder Kiryuuin casually unhooked the scissor blade from the ball chain ring tethering it to Bakuzan Kouryuu's guard, briefly inspecting its workmanship with a disinterested gaze.

"You lack refinement. This shows in the unevenness of your strokes, the careless thought you put into this now permanent... decoration. You are a wild animal, untrained. For that, you had gotten more than your fair share of new scars during your fight with Satsuki." She moved now, positioning herself directly within the brainwashed girl's limited line of sight. "Battle is a match of finesse and maneuverability, not just a show of strength versus ideals."

The flat of the hardened life fiber weapon brushed against her skin. Ryuuko stayed quiet, accepting the admonishment without complaint.

"But you will become stronger than you ever thought and faster than the winds of change you represent." Slender fingers wormed their way under Ryuuko's chin and gently brought it upward, ensuring pairs of matching pupils met each other. "I will make sure of it. Nothing will ever hurt you again or make you feel like you don't belong somewhere in this cruel world of ours. After all, those too weak to behold the world in its form must perish, as dictated by the laws of our god and nature. But for now," she sighed, releasing her hold on Ryuuko and moving behind the bound girl. "You will have to simply endure."

Ryuuko flinched as her own scissor blade was used to slide into the back of her neck, shivering upon contact with the cold blade more than anything. She lay still as Ragyou dug deeper, *'be good for mama'* repeating over and over in her head like a broken record. Heat bloomed in her chest, soon spreading outward to the tips of her fingers and toes. Junketsu reacted as the sword brushed against their intertwined fibers, somewhat dulling the pain enough to make the operation tolerable without too much squirming movement on her end.

"Fascinating," Ragyou grinned, watching the wound close in on itself and the skin merge together until no trace of the injury remained. "I will enjoy testing the limits of the strength afforded to you by the life fibers."

With that, Ragyou reopened the cut, holding the blade in place to prevent premature closure. She raised a hand to the tall bobbin above and grabbed hold of a bundle of life fibers, feeding their trailing ends into the wound below.

Ryuuko's hands grabbed the corners of the metal surgical table in agony. Knuckles whitened as her grip turned deadly, entire corners breaking off in her hold. At first, they refused to absorb into Ryuuko's body, merely laying in place atop the plane of her own writhing fibers. Then, with encouragement from the kamui's ones, they disappeared, melting and fusing with the body until no trace of the inlaid threads remained.

The tests ran on for the better part of the afternoon, soon stretching into the evening. And in that time, Ragyou hacked away at different parts of her captive daughter's body, threaded more life fibers into them, recorded vitals, and watched new wounds close themselves as she noted the time it took for the injuries to fully heal. Sometimes, she removed threads, gleefully

watching as her body quickly produced new ones to replace their missing brethren. And in several bizarre instances, she intentionally sliced at Junketsu - a mere cut here and there - but never where god robe and wearer were bound. To her delight, she watched as Ryuuko's fibers rose to the immaculate god robe's own, offering themselves to replaced the damaged threads. Her movements became hurried, more careless as euphoria started to overtake her, to drive her to brilliant madness at the sight of how quickly Ryuuko was progressing in her advanced resilience and healing abilities. She spared her favored daughter no pain, no corner of her body left unchecked and unmarred and un-experimented upon. But throughout it all, the kamui bore witness and intentionally kept its wearer sedate, trapping her mind within a torrent of falsified childhood memories - a damage control of sorts.

The Kiryuuin matriarch now twirled the scissor half in her hand, adjusting it so that it pointed down. Methodically, she started sawing through Ryuuko's arm, starting at the bony plate near a shoulder. The pleasurable haze finally broke, and Ryuuko was unwillingly freed of the blissful dream-state and released into a world of pure agony. Monitors flashed red as the younger girl's vitals soared and blood oxygen levels simultaneously dropped. The girl screamed as a high-pressure torrent of blood spurted from the gash like a broken fire hydrant, coating the entire floor. With a pained roar, the life fiber hybrid ripped free of her bindings. The cuffs surrounding her wrists went first, weakened from her earlier thrashing. The ones at her midsection and knees were next when she arched her back in agony, flailing limbs driving back the wickedly-grinning matriarch. Ragyou rubbed circles with the pad of a thumb on her favored daughter's head as she continued to writhe and squirm, noting with satisfaction as red threads snaked out from one end to tether into the other end, her body effectively suturing the wound shut with itself in mere seconds.

Spent, Ryuuko bonelessly collapsed back onto the table, groaning and panting while sweat beaded and ran down her body profusely.

"Most... interesting... Your fibers seem to be much more advanced than I previously thought. Such a shame I can't get around to fully analyzing the extent of your magnificent healing abilities, but I suppose we can put it off for now..."

An obligatory "I'm sorry," managed to escape the girl's mouth before she could stop it. Ragyou merely waved her hand in dismissal, Rei dutifully removing the medical devices and unfastening the remaining few restraints.

Ryuuko stewed as her mother's secretary attended to the metal bindings. Quite shamefully, she almost didn't feel like apologizing for something that was entirely not her fault, for deep within her heart lay an unknown source of almost fetid loathing. She wasn't sure, but it flashed now and then since Satsuki had partially sawn Junketsu off of her; no prior memory existed of her ever having such a peculiar affliction before. It occasionally flared up whenever Ragyou's whims decided to be less than all-loving, biting at the edges of her mind faster than Junketsu could thankfully repress them and send them back into the shadowy depths where they belonged.

'They are toxic beliefs', she told herself over and over again whenever they reappeared, 'mother had made her pure with the gift of the most beautiful wedding dress in the world, and she was to remain pure to her very last dying breath with it.'

The chants repeated themselves for as long as it took for the feelings to go away - usually a good half hour. And yet, she almost wanted to give in to the madness just as she had surrendered her will to the kamui lying above her skin. To inform her much loved mother, to have her take away this pain, this agony!

And yet... she didn't.

She wasn't sure why, but the thought of stabbing her mother, the very want to take the nearest blunt instrument present in the room and just smash into into her skull over and over and over again until nothing but fibrous pulp and shards of white bone were left filled her with a sick glee. It lingered at the back of her mind, whispering to her, making her heart pound with anticipation and send her blood into a boiling froth as the notion of violently attacking the one that gave her the power to crush all that stood before her and usurp her position as the bearer of mankind's downfall.

Ragyou extended a hand, and Ryuuko took it gratefully, wobbling on unsteady feet as she was made to follow the former through a hall and down a winding set of stairs, leaving Rei behind to dutifully examine the plethora of data.

"With the passing of the day, you have officially came of age. This is a tradition passed down from generation to generation." Her tone softened, lips twitching into a pleased smile, "Be honored. You will be given the greatest blessing of mankind."

Ryuuko almost stopped walking. *'My... birthday...?'* she thought. *'I forgot today... was my birthday?'*

So engrossed in thoughts of how she could possibly have overlooked the date that she didn't notice that Ragyou had stopped until she very nearly collided with a door. Ragyou silently pushed it open, the girl silently following her soon after.

"What is this place?" Ryuuko whispered to herself, gazing at awe at the sight that lay before her.

In the center of the room, a gourd-shaped behemoth stood, filling the room with its brilliance. A thin column diverged from the central body like a tree, with several spherical masses hanging from 'branches' that spread along the lengths of the walls and ceiling. Energy pulsed within, charging the very air itself.

Ragyou moved ahead, greeting the Kiryuuin's long-held secret with open arms and a declaration of continued generational subservience. The primordial life fiber thrummed with life in response, mustard-colored light emanating from its massive depths.

Two thin tendrils wormed their way out of the much larger ball of glorified yarn, snaking in the air towards Ryuuko, twisting and curling and writhing mindlessly like maggots. Worms. She stared at them apprehensively, not daring to move even though some small part inside of her screamed at her every muscle to turn around and flee. Torn between the decision to evade a possible attack or stay still and obey her mother's wishes, she struggled, feeling as if she would fly to pieces. Silently, they wrapped around the girl's thin waist, tightly binding her arms to her sides.

"Hey, what the - !?"

"Ryuuko, my dear child," Ragyou purred, gleefully watching both clothing and child as the fibers lifted her high into the air and close to the ceiling. "Relax, and let the life fibers do their work."

Three similar tendrils of width and size approached their captive. They came closer, attaching to her temples and the middle of her forehead.

"Ngh!"

A startled cry, not unlike a cross between a choke and a scream, slipped between sharp teeth as the threads pierced through her skin. In that very second, blood was taken, and a connection was made. Pinprick red eyes dilated, pupils wide with terror. Her head soon lolled back, mouth agape and body relaxed as a dull red radiance soon surrounded her and the taut threads.

An oppressive aura pressed down all around her mind, drowning her consciousness as if she were once again at the bottom of Toukyou Bay. Nothing but the simple decree of "*obey*" was repeated over and over. She felt as if there were millions of eyes gazing down upon her, silently judging her with the enormous strength of their collective gaze. Every last one of them had a sinister shine to their pupils, as if they were a predator that just had caught sight of wounded prey. She mentally struggled against it, pushing against its intruding presence and fighting with pure force of will despite Junketsu and the fibers within herself singing that this was right, that this was the connection that every human should strive for - the peak of perfection.

The pressure eased. She felt her surroundings change the slightest bit. There was a moment of silence, when everything seemed to freeze in time for just a nanosecond.

Then, the floodgates opened, and a barrage of almost-indistinct images assaulted her mental state.

A memory came to her, then, vague and fuzzy around the borders in appearance, as if it were from an old film reel. A single red thread winding its way around her waist in the same manner as what was happening now. A mighty heave, and the dizzying sensation of being lifted off her feet and held high in the air above a sea of thousands of dots of white. A male voice, speaking to her. Then, the feeling of animalistic, mindless white-hot rage overtook her, and she remembered nothing more about the incident despite her questing mind prodding.

Another vision appeared. This time, she found herself unable to move her limbs, for they were rendered paralyzed by the dozens of glimmering red strings holding them in place. Panic overtook her. Muscles spasmed violently as she brutally blocked off the rest of the memory from playing. Despite her efforts, she heard her past self shouting desperate cries and sobbing pleas to somebody, and she soon found her own voice joining in.

"Stop!"

A figure in white moved before her, flickering in and out of her view as remembrance and reality collided. It was beautiful, with feathers nestling about its arms and framing a long, slender back. Delirious, Ryuuko thought it an angel. When it moved closer however, the features sharpened somewhat, giving definition to a face that suspiciously looked like it belonged to -

Ragyou noticed her twitchy movements and gaily laughed. "Open your heart to the primordial life fiber as I have done, Ryuuko. Then you shall truly see what I meant when I showed you the truths of this world and understand the world and its dysfunctional ways exactly as I do. Through your awakening, you know, but you do not truly grasp the enormity of our places in the universe. Let go, and let it take control."

"Ohhhhhhh..." she groaned, suddenly finding herself weary and out of breath, as if she had ran several marathons without stopping.

The primordial life fiber wove its way through her and Junketsu's life fibers, adding its own to the intertwined strands that ran through the girl's entire body. For the longest time, all was silent. Then, a curious sound not unlike the one Junketsu made when it first attempted to communicate with her hissed in her mind, looping over each other in an endless wave of chatter. A chanting murmur filled the space in between, the melded consciousnesses speaking to one another in seemingly random patterns. Inhuman screeches and undulating calls pierced far above the indistinct murmur on occasion, sending involuntary chills up her spine. Ryuuko twitched, feeling rather than hearing its speech. Echoing with the synthesized voice of the thousands of humans it had consumed over innumerable centuries, it spoke as one unit, the sound deafening enough to permanently remove one's sense of hearing had it been an actual voice. Her mind shivered at the noise, and the hybrid instinctively flinched as far back as she could in her incapacitated state.

*"No offering or mere human marked for consumption are you, for your distinctiveness tells otherwise. Indeed, I can sense deep within you the cries of my own kind both those that were and were not cuttings taken directly from my stems. So, without any further ado, **greetings...**"*

She felt it probe around in her mind, threads thinner than a hair invading her central nervous system and running down the lengths of her internal systems. The thrilling toe-curling pleasure the white kamui normally offered multiplied exponentially in the resulting feedback, and her mind blanked at the overwhelming sensation. Her body shuddered the slightest bit, and a wave of stars blanketed her vision as the remnants of the long-withheld release pulsed through her. Junketsu practically hummed in excitement as several of its own fibers merged with the primordial life fiber's own, as if eager to reconnect with its brethren. When it spoke again, its overlaid voices carried a note of amusement.

"...Kiryuuin Ryuuko."

Ryuuko bit back another choked cry of surprise as her own name was uttered by the voice of the legion.

"Another comes into the service of the life fibers, continuing the generational tradition of guardianship. Many have come to me over countless years, seeking wisdom and power."

The fibers attached to the three points on Ryuuko's head briefly flashed brightly during the exchange, no doubt solidifying the connection past the need for direct physical contact. For her part, Ryuuko stayed silent, paralyzed by childlike wonder and all-consuming awe.

"Perhaps we should introduce ourselves. We are one. We are many. We are what humans collectively called 'god' in the beginning. We are the original bundle that touched down on this planet and developed life as we saw fit."

As it spoke, images flashed in Ryuuko's head. A gigantic explosion that sent a wave of red outward like a bloody tsunami. A single slender red thread of fate. The chilling depths of the sea underneath, the lonely void of space, and everything in between. She saw a strange world, with towering beasts and unfamiliar plants. She saw murder. She committed murder, taking the view of the single crimson string as it attached to the closest organism and leeches its life away until it expired not a moment later. She saw humans in their most primal form, hunched over and gripping makeshift weapons with every ounce of strength they had. She saw how the fibers had chosen to ingrain themselves within the human society, accelerating the species's development by encouraging mutations that mutually benefitted both parasite and host and abandoning those that failed to fit the narrative, willingly stranding them in the midst of predators to dispose of the unwanted traits.

"Our kind have survived for eons, drifting to the corners of the galaxy in protected capsules to find and seed new life on planets, akin to what your kind calls 'sporulation'. Before we arrived, we were but a single thread, weakened and easily susceptible to destruction. Then, by attaching to several hosts and consuming them, we grew and were able to exert our influence."

Through selective parsing, all but those belonging to the Kiryuuns have eventually died out, unable to withstand the full strain of carrying the life fibers within themselves, though there are many indirect descendants of the original clans that bear some degree of harmony with the life fibers."

You, Kiryuun Ryuuko, are the first that have come to me already perfectly synchronized with the life fibers within yourself and the kamui you were entrusted with. Indeed, even your own progenitor had to be imbued with our power through direct fusion."

There was a brief moment of silence as it took to rummaging around, seeing through her mind's eye everything that had led up to her current life and those falsified by pure psychological tampering. Murmuring with agreement with what it saw, it continued.

"So you have entered my current guardian's service, loyal and yielding only to her command. I see her intents as clear as the skies I have travelled into many years ago. I also see that the strength that lies within yourself will become much more powerful than what she hopes to gain either through her own will or by life fiber augmentations."

'Why is it telling me this?' Ryuuko thought, unwelcome hatred for Ragyou rearing its ugly head once more.

The primordial life fiber seemed to hum in amusement, the thousands of voices stopping their mindless chatter for a mere microsecond and join in a collective chuckle.

"She has not achieved the degree of being able to hear us, as adept with manipulating her life fibers as she is. The life fibers within you are... special... unique... more evolved than what I have seen before. Perhaps you will become the next keeper or the new messenger of the unyielding truth that all of humanity must submit to, in the case of her plan's failure. It would do you good to be prepared for that role. For now, this is a mere precursor to your new task. Bask in it and revel in what is to come."

"Hey, wait - !"

Ryuuko writhed within the tendrils' grip, the sudden surge of power almost too much for her. But the kamui bore the weight patiently, the added strength from the direct fusion with the primordial life fiber bolstering its abilities to manage the flux and allow for increased capacitance. A bright whitish-red light soon consumed the girl, and she shone brilliantly, washing the room in a flare that could easily rival that of the sun.

Junketsu activated without prompting, blue stars adding to the colossal pillar of light that soon engulfed the entirety of the chamber, although its form was changed. The tapering horns adorning Ryuuko's hair became longer and sleeker, appearing to hug the curves of her head rather than awkwardly jut out. The red streaks accentuating Ryuuko's eyes grew more vivid and lengthier in appearance as the trailing ends trisected, giving her crazed face a rather demonic look. The pleated hakama folds were fringed with a thin strip of blue at their ends, matching the di-colored pattern of the thick band that snugly overlaid Ryuuko's abdomen. Finally, the spines adorning the length of her back grew ever so slightly more pronounced, the one furthest away from Junketsu's pauldrons lengthening the most.

The tendrils let go, and Ryuuko plummeted, barely managing to land in a crouching position. Bits of plaster shook loose from the aging room upon impact, coating the primordial life fiber in a fine coating of white dust. The elder hybrid moved a finger, and Ryuuko obediently followed after taking a moment to catch her breath, trailing behind by a customary three steps. The Revoc's CEO gave the writing orange mass a knowing nod as soon as they were outside, and slowly shut the enormous doors leading to the equally cavernous room. They walked down hallways that seemed much too ornate for only a few people to live in for what seemed like hours, the corridors becoming more maze-like as they progressed.

Ryuuko tried to remember if the mansion was always empty. Weren't there supposed to be servants scuttling around at every waking moment of the day? She paused in her movements and thought. Yes, she did remember a fat man with a poorly groomed mustache taking care of her when she was younger by barking at his charges to do his work for him. Takiji Kuroido, or something like that. But what happened to them? Did they suddenly up and leave mother, abandoning the cause for their own selfish desires? Or were they eaten by the COVERS - or better yet, the Primordial Life Fiber itself?

Ragyou smiled, turning around and gently running a hand through the younger girl's hair and down her back repeatedly as one would with a simple pet. However, this was merely a ruse - with every stroke, her fingers lightly flicked against the fibers that were surely piercing through the latter's skin and interweaving with hers, testing their tautness and ensuring that Ryuuko still as loyal as ever after the brief session with the primordial life fiber.

Satisfied, she moved behind her second daughter, pleased to note the thrice-over forged bond as she repeated the motions down the younger's flanks as she began to indulge less... wholesome wants. Ryuuko stood still and submissive, ignoring the touches that went on for far too long and prodded at spots far too sore to to be adequately tolerated for much longer. Despite what Ragyou thought, Ryuuko knew exactly what was going on, and the mere action pissed her off to no end. No matter how subtle the older woman tried to do it, her nails grated painfully against the life fibers embedded within herself, tearing away at the sheer pleasure Junketsu afforded.

As much as she hated to admit it, the regular "grooming" sessions were becoming quite irritating even though her mind rationalized that Ragyou did it to calm herself. The biting hatred surfaced again, this time in the form of well-hidden disgust that Ragyou didn't trust her despite everything she had done in her name, especially within the last few weeks. In a fit of bitter melancholy, she thought how Nui was much more loved than she was. Junketsu shushed her with a gentle tug on her mind, and she settled down with a quiet huff, reminding herself of everything mother sacrificed for her for the past eighteen years.

Ragyou then moved to the girl's front, casually wrapping an arm around the other's waist and kissing her deeply, as if she somehow knew about the internal storm brewing within. Tension forgotten, her body instantly slackened. Ryuuko felt a canine catch on something as the elder completed the gesture and noted with great interest a spot of blood that lay on perfectly plump lips. She idly wondered if consuming blood in the same manner life fibers did would be enough to replenish her health. A tongue ran over warm lips, and she found herself wanting to lick the other's as well, just so she could find out for herself. She leaned forward, eyes never leaving that singular drop, honed in on the way it was perfectly sized, the red bead just waiting for her...

Then the elder was gone, whisked away into the dark depths of the historical building with little more than a swish of her dress. Ryuuko stood there, a hand to her face and a dazed look plastered upon it.

A powerful surge rushes through her body, and she shudders in delight as the chemical cocktail returns in force. The first taste of mankind's first sin in its rawest form was intoxicating, and despite having only recently separated after only spending less than eight minutes with it, she felt herself craving its contact more. Her heart pulsed faster and her breath slightly hitched in her chest upon the thought, mind consumed with the question of when she was able to see the primordial life fiber or have access to the chamber once more. Ragyou's touches paled in comparison, and she recently noticed with increased frustration that no matter how good Junketsu felt even when synchronized with her, that release never truly came for her until the primordial life fiber intervened - it was all just a roller-coaster ride that never dropped, only kept building up and up to something that would never happen on its own. A gloved hand clenched, teeth gritting. Selfishly, she wanted someone to attack her right now, just so she wouldn't think about this.

A thought suddenly occurred to her, and she smirked, relaxing. Knowing something that Ragyou didn't soothed her. What mother didn't know wouldn't hurt her, and what better a secret to keep if it was straight from the entity she believed as 'god'?

Part of her screamed that she should tell her verbatim what transpired in that room. Another part whispered that she shouldn't, that she should keep it a secret lest the forbidden fruit of knowledge be forever closed off to her once more. Junketsu mediated, and she eventually came to swiftly agree with its decision that the exchange should only be brought up if mother mentioned it first. Else, they would continue to live life as normal.

She inwardly beamed, lightly brushing a hand over its luxurious threads. No wonder mother entrusted one of her most prized possessions to her - Junketsu always knew what to do to help her out!

Reminded of her current form, she chuckled, low and throaty. Mother wished her to be more powerful, and that very wish was granted. But what was the point in seeing how much stronger you had gotten if you couldn't test it out?

There was only one person in the world worthy of testing her power against. Her legs started to carry her forward, but her mind halted their progress, staying her intense bloodlust. Plagued with indecision, she gazed at the blank ceiling as if it held all the answers. She snorted, then turned and walked in another direction.

It wouldn't do well to suddenly charge into battle in this state, even if victory was sharply slanted in her favor. For now, she would wait and see. Things usually became more interesting that way. Who knows, maybe she'd even help the weakling of a "sibling" and let her get stronger as well. For fun, of course. And research. It made for a more fitting battle when the sides were evenly matched, and she just wanted to see the limit of power one could have when a crude synchronization was paired with an equally shoddy excuse of a kamui.

Somehow, she knew mother would agree.

Eve ventured into the garden and took a bite of the apple, core and all. And thus, the seed of discord and dissent was planted.

Chapter End Notes

Ragyou can hear life fibers as they are derivatives of the original fiber (she was able to hear Senketsu, but that might probably be due to his status as being neither clothing nor human and hers as a hybrid), but not the Original/Primordial Life Fiber unless she is directly connected to it. Think of it as the O/PLF being only synched to Ryuuko's "hearing range" in this instance.

一心流

Chapter Summary

TL;DR: Ryuuko enters the stage Evil Kneivel-style. Satsuki tries to appeal to Ryuuko's senses (it works just as well as you'd expect) and Ryuuko tries to be a vampire and/or commit cannibalism.

In dystopian Japan, life fiber override you.

Chapter Notes

Previously named "Iron and Stone" to fit in with her character and the theme of ascribing personalities based on the lyrics of Gazelle Twin's song, "I am Shell; I am Bone".

Apparently, the religious theme in KKK was unintentional, according to creators. Whoops.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Take up your sword,’ the sinner said, ‘if you are my avenger be. Deny yourself, and clothes forsake, and humbly follow after me.’”

(Hymn of the Fiberborn, III / The Ballad of Kiryuuin Satsuki, I)

Satsuki ran.

It wasn't the graceful stride she was accustomed to, nor was it measured and purposeful with every step. No, this was Satsuki Kiryuuin running barefoot, swathed in a dirtied bedsheet with a metaphorical tail between her legs yet again. Stripped of the black kamui, she only hoped Mankanshoku and the devas remembered to hide it in the drop off point, lest the sadistic Grand Couturier get her hands on it. Satsuki hoped they hadn't been caught yet-losing Senketsu as an asset would deal a blow far more devastating than losing the Naked Sol. If push came to shove, however, she hoped they would destroy it with Nudist Beach's weapons; she didn't want to end up like...

She heard a laugh reverberate off empty buildings. An unnatural wind kissed loose strands of hair. In her peripheral vision, she caught a colored flash glancing by broken windows, whose jagged shards gaped like maws to the unknown. White and blue, colors used to be worn by her with unparalleled pride, now belonged to the second greatest threat alive to mankind.

She swore and clung to the shadows more tightly, hoping she hadn't been noticed amongst the detritus. She knew Ryuuko had been stalking her- it was her plan to serve as a distraction while the rest of the team escaped unnoticed by her or Nui, after all. Considering her iron resolve and innate resourcefulness, Satsuki wondered why they hadn't outright killed her yet rather than toying with her over the last week.

To put a topper on this glorious cake of misery, it was raining for the third day in a row. It only slowed her progress, gave away her position if she chose to use the dirt roads, and made foraging significantly harder in the dimmer light. On the other hand, it erased her presence and gave Ryuuko a much harder time gaining a surprise advantage. The empty streets of Honnou City, once outfitted with enough decadence to outfit royalty, welcomed her mockingly, throwing out great gray arms with great gray ruins out towards her. '*Okaeri*', it snidely seemed to say.

'Tadaima,' Satsuki muttered back under her breath, taking shelter in the least damaged shack in the no-star district.

The rain pattering on the corrugated roof gave her a sense of normalcy. The white noise greatly comforted her, reminding her of nights so long ago when Soroi would loyally stand at her side with a cup of his special brisk tea, amicably chatting with whatever came to mind in that equally special brisk way of his. To her surprise and great luck, there was an untouched storage of dry food in the back room when she started exploring the dilapidated household.

She quickly marks it and hides it behind a seemingly innocuous pile of rubbish, snaking through the dilapidated "houses" that littered the compound. Her target in sight, she quickly slips in with a flutter of her makeshift "cloak", all but barricading the window she entered through. Satsuki pauses, and listens. Nothing but the wind battering the loosened metal flaps and shoddy walling sounds, but she knows better. She knows the seconds in the hourglass are running out. So she gets to work, navigating through the structure with practiced ease in pure darkness and barricading openings whenever possible.

In the depths of the foreboding darkness, metal glinted. Something caught her eye.

She turned and cautiously strode towards it, finding a simple note pinned to the door with an expertly placed life fiber jamming needle.

'*Satsuki-chan*,' was neatly printed. A smear of light red ink ran right through it, partially obscuring the characters.

'*Satsuki-sama*,' blocky, ink-heavy writing corrected.

'*The underachiever*-'

'*Mankanshoku*,' Gamagoori had corrected again.

'-hid it according to your instructions. You know where to find us. Can't stay too long. She's watching.'

She smiled. It was surprisingly a genuine one. She couldn't remember the last time she smiled like this, and the brief respite sends a somewhat warm feeling pulsing through her from her head to her toes. So they made it out just fine, it seemed.

The box itself was hard to find, given that her elites had followed her instructions to the letter and hid it in the most inconspicuous place possible within the chaotic interior of the household. More than a couple floorboards were unceremoniously ripped from their frames before it was located partially buried under rubbish.

Grinning inwardly, she opened the box and fished out the material hidden under a laundered orange set of pajamas adorned with white cartoon rabbits. Senketsu squinted in the sudden flood of light, the cloth bunching in a close approximation of a wince before opening again, focusing on the person holding it.

"Hi," she smiled at the sailor uniform, fingering the worn and lovingly maintained cloth between dextrous fingers.

The multicolored eye blinked. The knot that tied its lapels together moved up and down. Satsuki supposed that meant it was also pleased to see her.

Casting the sheet aside, she donned the kamui and its accompanying glove. Senketsu reassuringly tightened against her bust lightly. Its eye drifted back to the box before snapping back up to look at her again.

Satsuki quirked a thick brow, pushing aside the worn pajamas as the sailor uniform's behest. Inside were twin Bakuzan Gako and Kouryuu, neatly crossed over each other in a simple 'X'. Deft hands quickly picked them up then, feeling their heft several times over and relishing their simple presence.

BANG.

She looked up, startled as the dresser drawer blocking the door suddenly fell and shook the dilapidated shack upon impact. Brows furrowed in acute, half-concealed panic. Every muscle in her body tensed, waiting for the inevitable. She heard quiet shuffling outside, something heavy scraping against the ground, and a muffled laugh. No doubt it was a cheap ploy to unnerve- a tactic that would have worked, had it not been employed against one who had lived and thrived through worse.

BANG.

The door shook in its frame upon impact, the wood rattling warningly. She adjusted her grip on her blades and shifted her stance so that it was centered more towards the ground. Not a moment passed before a heeled boot slammed against the thin barrier and kicked it in effortlessly. The ebony-haired teen ducked, the cheap plywood flying past her head at over two hundred kilometers per hour and splintered upon impact against an equally shoddily-made wall.

Wild cobalt-blue eyes rolled in their sockets. Chapped, bloodied lips pulled up to reveal sharp teeth. Junketsu stared mutely as the scene unfolded with eerie, entirely alien eyes. A red scissor blade menacingly jutted towards her, coated in a thick layer of fresh, still-dripping blood. Satsuki didn't want to know where it came from.

"Knock, knock," came Ryuuko's voice, laughing breathlessly. Manically.

She pressed forward, her form seemingly filling the entire space with every step she took. The tattered remains of the Nudist Beach logo fluttered meekly in the driving wind. Many bandoliers draped across her waist and were mounted atop the thrice-spiked adornments framing her hips- one of them notched in the same way Nonon notched hers after every ten confirmed COVERS kills.

Satsuki's eyes widened in shock. She was out of time.

A slash of red rushed to meet her, and she barely managed to block it in time. Old wounds and strained muscles came back with a vengeance, and she was left in a tortuous medley of varying degrees of pain.

"Senketsu!" she hissed, and the simple way his eye widened and flickered to her briefly told her more than she needed to know.

Satsuki wedged the small blade between the pin and the glove, already making a move to pry it off. Her brief attempts at leveling the field, however, were quickly dashed as Ryuuko used the flat side of her scissor sword to jostle her arm and knock it away.

The blade swiftly flicked out again, already in its decapitation mode. Satsuki raised twin Bakuzan in defense, although the red arc simply smashed through them, whipped around, slammed into her gut, and carried her out a newly-made hole in the wall. She flew quite a ways away, body crumpling as gravity swiftly reasserted its hold and dumped her down a stairway. Bakuzan's newly created fragments clattered as they struck the ground, falling about her like snow.

Clack. Clack. Clack.

She barely managed to look up, body convulsing and refusing to respond to her will. Her reward for her efforts was a sharp heel planting into her side and rolling her onto her back. The last thing she heard before the scissor sword's sharp side slammed into her body and through her heart was Ryuuko's quiet sniggering.

She gasped, abruptly pulling herself out of the sleep that managed to slip by her defenses and take her unawares. A hand instinctively reached for her side, and her entire body relaxed upon brushing the polished white hilt of the dagger. Inwardly, she chastised herself for slacking off, for falling victim to these meaningless thoughts and fanciful scenarios. Satsuki reclined further into the chair provided at the helm, reaching for the familiar bitterness of

Soroi's tea. At that point, she had been on watch duty for at least two straight days now. She drank deeply, only inwardly noting with a slight hint of disgust that it had gotten cold.

How long had she slept?

The adrenaline rush was petering out now, taking with it the worst of the dream. It had been so vivid, though, and she could not help but fiercely clench the patch of skin over her heart even as the images faded away and became far more cartoonish in appearance.

Winter was coming.

The former Student Council President felt it in the way the oncoming chill snaked past the thin double-breasted coat she often wore over Senketsu and settled against her bones. The way the leaves yellowed and browned and fell to the ground in increments. The way Nudist Beach was rarely seen outside of the warmer ship interior unless there was an emergency. The way a flying Mako had attacked her the other day and all but shoved a scarlet scarf in her hands despite their shared unfamiliarity, proving herself quite difficult to deter once she became dedicated to her goal.

The scarf, of course, was in as good of a condition as the rest of Mankanshoku's uniform-messy, dotted with small holes, covered in crumbs and small oil flecks, and riddled with more unknown things than the former ruler of Honnouji could count on both hands. Still, she had accepted the simple gift, if only to quickly put an end to... whatever the smaller girl was doing, jumping about and conforming her body to imitate snowflakes and an extremely pale version of herself buried under a gigantic pile of snow. Perhaps in the midst of the fast-paced gibberish she had mentioned something about contracting hypothermia and dying a miserable death before she had a chance to rescue her little sister like the knights of old, but Satsuki wasn't quite sure. She had taken the slightly tattered textile piece and gingerly donned it, if not to appease the younger girl and make her turn her doting harassment to one Ira Gamagoori, who had the misfortune of holding a piece of cheese he intended to eat.

Still, she wishes she could show her gratitude more openly around others. But this thought neither belonged to the present, nor did it belong in any time period for that matter except for ones after Ragyou was defeated and her entire empire of clothing destroyed. Kiryuuin Satsuki is not to be dissuaded from the task put for her, no matter the impossibility or the staggering cost, and so her body is pushed to its limit and far past it in her endeavors, as per usual.

"You should get inside," a deep masculine voice intones, and she is startled from her reverie.

She briefly whips around to find the source of the voice before remembering it came from above her head. It is faint, as if someone were speaking through a filter far away, but she knows and recognizes the voice as the black kamui's. Ever since their first synchronization, she was able to hear bits and pieces of his speech, if not at random intervals and only very small fragments of words. Nothing substantial came until their third activation, where they were testing the time limits of synchronization while remaining idle. From then on, phrases began to occur more commonly until she could hear full sentences.

Well, almost, anyway. The short, terse sentences the sailor fuku outputted were significantly easier to pick up than the lengthier ones- those took several tries before she understood what

it wanted.

While not gifted like her sister with the ability to hear it easily and on the first try (as it said with a slightly depressed tone), she supposed that their genetic relation made it possible. Senketsu was partially made out of Ryuuko's DNA, after all. Or, at least, according the Nudist Beach head's explanation as he sauntered about in the middle of a dramatic display of lab coat stripping, ensuring her inability to put the memory of his glowing nipples out of her mind for a few days.

"Lady Satsuki," Inumuta's voice buzzed in her ear. "I've pulled recent satellite images from the surrounding area."

Satsuki's end returns with nothing, and Houka took the silence as a sign that he should continue.

"There's been a recent disturbance in the closest city to the port we're currently inhabiting. A series of fires, rather. While not particularly interesting themselves, I've captured images of Matoi and Harime several minutes before the precinct detonated. Half the city was completely destroyed by the explosions or fire, although both of them survived."

A pinky flicking the earbud's switch ensures the communication channel goes both ways. Her voice is level. Familiar. Commanding as always. Her championship over stoicism ensures none but herself fully know what unnerves her.

"Do they know we're here?"

"Unlikely. Most of the images depict them idle. They didn't seem to have been looking for anything in particular, and they left shortly afterward. Based on the direction of travel, they seem to be heading indirectly away from us. Unfortunately, it is a high-traffic area for COVERS, which makes it difficult to visually find them."

She breathed through her nose. "Is there any other way to track them?"

There was a frenzy of typing on the other side. She patiently waited for an answer even as seconds turned into minutes, finally hearing a content sigh of relief through the comm system's speaker, something that she herself inwardly mimicked not to long after.

"I've broken into Revoc's database. Apparently, there's only fourteen tracking systems active. Most of them refer to the various vehicles employed, such as the helicopter- I'll save that in case it comes in handy. The last entry was heavily encrypted, but from what I managed to get out of it, it is a personal tracker, with its designation "M38126". I assume it refers to Matoi, given its earliest entry being within this month and that Harime Nui's loyalty is absolute and Matoi's is most likely... less assured, given her circumstances."

Her interest was piqued, astonishment steeping into the normally flat tone of voice she employed. Without a second thought, her body rose. "Ryuuko?"

He made a noise of affirmation. "It seems to have been disabled for a while- there's nothing that shows up after three days ago. The previous logs seem to be updated every ten minutes,

although I can probably configure the satellite to ping her more often... once I figure out what's going on and find the controls, that is. ...Every two hundred milliseconds should do it. Then at least we'll be able to get live updates."

By now, Satsuki was already making to go inside. "I don't think I need to remind you to destroy evidence of your intrusion, lest a less benevolent welcoming party greet you as I've done several years ago. I'm coming in approximately three minutes to go over the rest of the data. What's her recent activity?"

Quiet laughter echoed in her ears. "I've already taken measures to cloak my involvement in the matter and downloaded the personal tracking information we need, as well as the digital keys needed to access their more private files. I imagine it would have been difficult for them to trace my activity even if I hadn't cloaked it- the lack of technical staff on their end tends to have that effect. Anyway, Matoi's movements are extremely erratic. The coordinates indicate that she hasn't been in a single area for more than ten minutes. She doesn't seem to be heading in a clear direction, although we should probably keep a closer eye on her."

The heavy metal door shut with a resounding crash behind her.

"Agreed."

Inumuta abandoned his seat as Satsuki walked in, neatly snapping to attention. Nonon and Sanageyama follow in time, crisply saluting her a single arm folded across their chests. She nods, and they quickly sit back down, the blue-haired elite tapping a key and bringing a cascade of windows onto multiple wall-mounted screens.

Soroi comes to her side, a scalding cup of tea delicately perched in his hand. She takes it, breathing in the vapors and savoring its rich scent.

"Scouting parties one through four have returned, along with all two Nav Sols. They've managed to siphon off the rest of the stored gasoline from the plant you were looking at as well as brought an additional small ship we can dismantle for supplies. Further expeditions using the Nav Sols should not be of any issues."

He gestured to the accompanying window, adjusting his glasses as necessary.

Repairs still are underway but are mostly finished, with no small thanks in your behalf. At this point, it would take until the end of the week to complete it. However, I can also make modifications to the defensive system to further resist damage against direct attacks and add several auto-turrets to target approaching COVERS now that I've managed to catalog their abilities and specific weaknesses after you engaged the last couple of parties the other day."

"Can the ship's generators handle an increased load?"

"Not with their current systems. However, I can add in another generator or two dedicated to solely powering the grid, and we should be fine. There is enough space to fit them in,

provided we also redo the electrical wiring and the plumbing systems. It shouldn't be too hard- most of the systems are centered on the other side of the ship, anyway. Give us a day, and we'll have them fully rerouted."

He gave a thin lipped smile. "The situation is hopeless and the demands impossible. But impossible is what we do, Lady Satsuki."

"Indeed. Status?"

Sanageyama answered in Inumuta's stead.

"Sectors three through ten are unavailable given the COVERS increased presence as of late. It is nothing that we can't handle, but the precincts aren't worth picking through, seeing as most of the previous residents had stripped pretty much anything useful. Of course, there is the option to strategically detonate the hot spots indicated here on this map. But seeing as it may attract more than desirable levels of attention, it is suggested we either do it late at night or slowly with torches."

"Never mind that for now," Satsuki decides, "Our focus should be on the best time to strike."

Houka parses through streams of seemingly random numbers and data entries.

"Based on the weather patterns I've taken from sources from the last twenty years, the ideal time to strike is... exactly two weeks and three hours from now. The fog cover should be more than enough to cover us for the entirety of our travel to our destination, based on the ship's base speed. With access to their systems, I can jam all communications on their end and make it look as if it were from storm damage."

She drinks, letting the tea burn her tongue and turn her insides raw with its liquid fire.

"I'll be gone for the entire day. Thanks to the intel we've recovered, we know the traffic for COVERS is highest during midday, and the entire city would be crawling with them within minutes."

"I can monitor your position from triangulating your position from the comm device in your ear. Would you like Jakuzure, Gamagoori, or Sanageyama for additional support?"

She doesn't miss the way both the pink and the green-haired elites straighten slightly, so eager in their loyalty to her and thought it over for a long minute. When she finally answered, her voice was as calm and collected as ever.

"No. In case something happens to me, they must carry on with their assigned territories."

"Lady Sats-

"A leader must prepare for the worst," she sighed into her teacup, sipping the last of the scalding liquid and giving the emptied china to her faithful friend and butler. "If anything happens to me, Houka, you are designated in charge of operations and the leader of the rest of the Elites."

Nonon starts to loudly protest. Inumuta speaks over her.

“Would you like additional-?”

Satsuki unsheathes Bakuzan Gako, the black blade brightly glinting in the little light, like a guiding star in the darkness.

“This dagger should be more than sufficient.”

Inumuta pauses and the other two gave their leader a knowing stare. Knowing any efforts to detract the mind of the indomitable Satsuki Kiryuuin would be futile, they can do nothing but accept her decision. It doesn't make their worried discontent any lighter, however.

“Take a Nav Sol. Both of them should be unloaded and refueled by now.”

She catches the keys he tosses at her without looking.

Her trek was lonely.

Around her neck, the lone red scarf still nestled, a gift one Mankanshoku Mako had insisted her wearing despite her secretive attempts to doff it and store it somewhere safe when the latter had caught her trying to leave without wearing it. The irrational way the girl thinks and moves has a certain charm to it. The disregard for societal barriers becomes less insulting once she realizes that Mankanshoku knows of Matoi's origins as well. Perhaps she thought by taking care of her in Ryuuko's stead, it would be just as if she was taking care of the delinquent herself. Maybe she wanted to be her friend, just as she became Ryuuko's friend.

Satsuki tries not to dwell on it. She doesn't have time to entertain such thoughts.

Nearby movement grabs her attention, and she looks up, spotting a gathering of suits creeping towards her.

On the other hand, she could always make time for this.

COVERS descended upon her then, a waterfall of white cloth and red-threaded links. They are hungry, and they are attracted to her fit, strong body like moths to a flame. They only know mindless hunger, and they soon meet their end at her hand. Bakuzan kisses them, and their lives are soon snuffed out like candle flames.

She doesn't bother activating the kamui as she springs up to meet the white rain. Even without the extra strength afforded by the god robe, the earth cracks under her feet and she shatters windows as she speeds by. The dagger whips out and she slices through them without a second thought, mechanically swinging over and over again like a mindless drone. Her movements are no longer as quite as refined as they were when she was a dictator presiding over the happenings of a city state. Rather, they are wild and yet controlled in their ferocity, sloppy yet contained in her actions. For that is what Ryuuko did, when she challenged everything Satsuki stood for and knew.

Ryuuko, the baby sister she long thought dead and had come close to death under her hand more times than she could count on her hands and toes over the last few months. Ryuuko, who had followed in Soichiro's- no, Isshin's- steps and taken on his mantle of fighting against the life fibers. Ryuuko, the only one whose single-minded goal of nobly avenging her father's death could be considered unfoolish. Ryuuko, her sister unwillingly turned enemy that was the best teacher Honnouji Academy ever had, even if it was completely unintentional and without her knowledge.

Now armed with the knowledge that the fathers that both she and Matoi had fought to avenge were one and the same, she cannot help but question whether the same man was looking down upon them from wherever he was. She hates herself (just a little) for asking the rhetorical question on whether he approved of both of their actions and was proud of them. Maybe he was. Maybe he wasn't. Ryuuko would have known, even if he had kept her at a distance most of the time. So she follows both of them, letting herself be guided rather than guide for once.

She isn't particularly religious or interested in the ceremonies of generations past, but sometimes, she lights incense and whispers words to them as the scented wood burns, tricking herself into believing that the smoke will carry her words to her sister's ear and somehow bring her back. She imagines Ryuuko loudly declaring that they smell like feet all the while and boorishly pinching her nose all the while, and the thought brings a smile to her face. Almost.

So she allows herself to follow in Ryuuko's steps, to break from tradition. She keeps Senketsu on day in and day out, and only wears black or more rugged attire, just as her sister once had. Her teeth flash in her rare smiles more and more often. Sometimes, her posture and mannerisms slips into that of stereotypical Japanese delinquents- short of dying her hair and donning ridiculous clothing choices, of course. 'R's are rolled and vowels slurred, for Ryuuko was molded in a harsh world where nothing but fighting tooth and nail for something matters and she does all these things without thinking. For Ryuuko wears black and her own unique form of resolute will allowed her to quickly amass the amount of strength she had obtained in her short tenure as a no-star student. And Satsuki mimics, does it all on behalf of the little sister that she never was there for.

She thinks. Believes.

She fights knowing fully well her transgressions of years past. Murdering students without care or just cause, writing them off as acceptable sacrifices in the name of the greater good. Manipulation of Sanageyama post-defeat and influencing his thoughts to drive him into self-mutilation just to please her. But she knows now that it was selfish and unforgivable, the way she had become so much like the monster of a mother she was trying so hard to destroy.

Was what Matoi said to her that day after that decisive battle during the Raid Trips true? Was she honestly friendless and alone? Could she honestly consider her elites as friends- Jakuzure included- or were they just lambs, trusting in her and being led to their slaughter?

Ryuuko knew. It was easily seen in how she and Mankanshoku had reciprocated each other's kindness, how she had let the latter nearly beat her to death while she took every hit without

complaint. Ryuuko knew of true friendship, of mutual beneficiary conduct that so glaringly contrasted with how she, Kiryuuin Satsuki, used everyone and everything for her advantage.

Perhaps that is why she now let the scarf remain wrapped around her neck. Perhaps she wanted to know the meaning of true friendship, to feel their trust and hear the words they said to each other within the very threads of this cloth, so lovingly protected in this harsh world of theirs. It's disgusting, it's informal, and it's so very un-Satsuki like, and it is exactly that- for all those reasons- that draw a certain attractiveness to the woven material. Perhaps Ryuuko drew her strength from friendship. That would have explained why she didn't feel the excruciatingly exhausting effect wearing a kamui like Senketsu tended to have. Satsuki wanted to know, to go beyond simple understanding, to see the world in the same lens Ryuuko did.

She holds her single weapon loosely in her palm, for that is how Ryuuko held hers. Her name could be read as meaning "flow" and her *raison d'être* is to do likewise. She sweeps herself up into a whirlwind of emotions and actions and shows it in the way she wields that red blade and changes her fighting technique to match her enemy's. So Satsuki loses herself in the passion of battle like Ryuuko did, and is deaf and blind to all but the oddly metallic sounds of her weapon slicing through endless mobs of suits and the sight of torrents of white cloth leisurely drifting back to Earth like falling leaves. In their death throes, their sleeves futilely flap and slap against the muddied ground, but she pays them no mind until none of them are left, and she is surrounded by nothing but a decrepit city and cloth corpses.

And just once, she allows herself to mouth the same words Ryuuko said once her enemies were laid low before her, and lets a finger whip through the air to form the accompanying characters- "腺衣喪失".

"Sen-i-soshitsu."

She is Matoi Ryuuko. She is Kiryuuin Satsuki. She is both of them and yet none of them at the same time, for she allows her sister's persona to fill in the gaps that Kiryuuin Satsuki left the day she died as a young child at the tender age of five and let herself be raised from the ashes as a cold and slightly-bitter one charged with the task of avenging the deaths of two family members and undertaking an impossible task. Any discrepancies between their personalities is smoothed over by the tide of time until they are seamlessly fused together, a being made without wax.

She ascends the tallest building in the area and makes it her perch. Her semi-prone form is sleek, dark against a lightening background as the stars and moon give way to the sun's yellow rays. Her eyes immediately adjust to the gradually increasing brightness and set out to denote areas of interest and mentally map them, taking notes on which ones they should preferably hit first in the small time frame they had left.

Senketsu is silent comfort and equally welcomed company, and she is thankful that it does not prattle mindlessly or otherwise distract her from the task at hand. An hour passes. The sun rises. Soldiers sent in from foreign countries to combat the clothing menace are easily overrun and eaten, one after the other despite their advanced weaponry. She relays the

situation back and adjusts her position, letting the darkness of a nearby building's shadow wash over her like a cleansing veil. The world moves on.

Some time had passed before Inumuta's voice crackled into her ear again.

"Lady Satsuki, we've detected another anomaly heading towards your location in T-minus ten seconds. It is highly likely that it is Matoi."

Satsuki slides up. Unbidden, the eight codes of karate her sensei recited every session started to play in her ear, and she stops short of engaging in voicing them herself.

"Converging on your location in three seconds..."

Eight. The ear must hear in all directions.

She hears a rustling in the background, a rattle made of metal that was carried on the winds and brought to her ears. It is low and humming, punctuated with thunderous, boastful snarls that thrum through the air like a heartbeat.

"Two seconds..."

Seven. The eye must see in all directions.

Cityscape. Tall buildings. Easy surveillance, if one was to only go about it linearly. Too much cover, and yet she still felt exposed. She moves. Vantage points and cover is all she cares for.

"One..."

The metallic droning grew ever louder. More roars soon took its place, and the deafening sound bounced off the buildings, making it impossible to discern its source.

"Now!"

She wasn't quite able to react to or anticipate a motorcycle slamming into her from above and behind until it is too late. The machine crashes against the steel frames and explodes, covering its rider with more than a small puff of flame and easily sending her flying over the handlebars. Both of them plummeted like lead balloons, with the rider faring far better at the crash landing than she did.

Satsuki tumbles and rolls about on the ground, eventually having the displeasure of tasting the dirt and grime that seem to pervade cities when her feet eventually gain traction and slow her to a stop. Ryuuko lands in a crouch, unconcerned even as falling metal panels large enough to instantly snuff her life out crash about, sending plumes of gray and brown dust about like tornadoes. Once the chaotic rain stops, she lifts both head and body and gives Satsuki a toothy grin.

"Long time no see, huh sis?"

Satsuki's eye narrows slightly. She manages to rise to her feet, ears still ringing and vision fuzzy about the edges.

Three. The manner of drinking and spitting is either hard or soft.

She doffs the black trenchcoat given to her by the nudists, letting it slowly slide down her upper arms before casting it aside with a quick throw. She decides to meet force with force and escalate it only when necessary- the safe way of going about fighting an unpredictable enemy.

Ryuuko and the image of Dream-Ryuuko phase over each other and intersect for the briefest of moments. In the stead of a morbid collection of dead nudists' utility belts, a singular gold-colored metal chain with twin Bakuzan's longer half rests upon her waist, snug against her hips. The ubiquitous scissor blade attaches to the chain wrapped around the handle, dangling freely.

Two. The circulation of blood is the same as the cycle of the sun and the moon.

Even though the situation has changed far more than either of them could have honestly expected, they are still opposites in everything, fated to be forever assigned to concepts such as darkness and light, red and blue.

One. A person's heart is the same as heaven and earth.

The first thing she noticed about the possessed girl was that she didn't even bother activating her kamui and was just standing there with a bored expression. Her face had grown more gaunt since their last encounter, her body thinner and more skeletal-like. Eyes ringed dark with sleepless nights stared into her soul like some dark, depraved thing from the bottom of an abyss. The second was that her eyes were no longer the stunning cobalt shade they used to be; now, they were as red like the vibrant bang of hair that swooped low over her brow, like their mother's. The third was the newly found calm and the new irritating aura of self-assurance the other radiated- a trait unusual for said person given their previous encounter.

She knows not of what happened over the course of the last two weeks since they had last exchanged blows, nor did she question it. Constantly analyzing her enemy's behavior, while invaluable in the past, had led her to make false assumptions that led humanity down this dark path and nearly cost her her life as well of those she came to know as her friends. Still, she allows her eyes to roam over her sister's- no, enemy's- body, and take in every detail from her relaxed stance to her dismissive, almost-smug behavior.

She expect a venomous taunt about how she showed up without the protection of the elite four, and is half-surprised when none comes. In its stead, the biting wind and the silence that follows speaks volumes to her. For the briefest fraction of a second, she wonders where Ryuuko ended and Junketsu began, or if their consciousness was melded into a single entity. Surely the former was more likely, as the subdued personality and lack of attacking on sight lent credence to the hypothesis.

They stare at each other at eye level, and Ryuuko finds part of her seething at the audacity. She wants nothing more than to launch herself at the pompous fool of a sibling standing before her, to rip her to shreds and tear her from the inside out and leave her as hollow and empty as she should have been from the very beginning. She twitches the slightest bit, and Satsuki takes that as the beginning of an attack.

The former President moves, dark black boots effortlessly kicking off the ground, and rips the pin off the red glove. Senketsu transforms around her as she runs, cloth shifting and wrapping tight about her arms and legs, deeply drinking from the red well that is her blood and feeding on the stream of cleaving adenosine triphosphate bodies. Her sister stares at her as she approaches, calmly tracking her despite the aggravated fire easily visible in her shifted stance.

Five. The body must be able to change directions at any time.

Satsuki flies at her with the smaller Bakuzan half, and Ryuuko predictably dodges, throwing a swipe of her own. Satsuki prevents it from connecting with a side block and throws out a jab, which is then swatted away with the other's palm. Seeing the deadlock in close combat, the elder disengages, running along the sides of the arching buildings above. Her weight shifts, and she pushes off the crosslinked metal, one leg extended and ready to drive a heel into the shorter girl.

The latter moves aside, letting the pointed sole sail past her harmlessly and impact the asphalted ground below. Satsuki whips her other leg back and pivots, using the last bit of the fall's momentum to swing it out. Ryuuko merely lets the shin collide with a gold-patterned side, heels only sliding a mere fraction of a centimeter from the same force that had easily caused her to part with the ground so many months ago. In fact, she openly mocks her attempts, voice warped and raspier from dehydration.

Four. A person's weight is the same as unbalance.

Satsuki hides her shock well and elects to jackknife her legs out from under her. Ryuuko allows herself to fall, breaking her descent with one hand. In the same fluid motion, her body curls and uncurls, a singular white-booted leg kicking out and planting itself in the elder sibling's stomach.

The elder flies off, hanging in the air long enough for her to activate Senketsu's Shippu form and gain a tactical advantage in the air. Her fist connects with the younger girl's jaw. Ryuuko grins as she is also sent flying with blood dripping down her chin and speeds off, melting into the surroundings quite easily despite the stark-white clothing making her standing out amidst the muted grays and blacks surrounding them.

When she does reappear, it is in a flash of white that easily follows beside her sibling, leaving tracer lights of light blue behind that twinkle like fading lights. Satsuki couldn't even see her coming. Ryuuko sidles up beside her, smirking deviously. A mischievous glint reflects in her eyes, and her hands move swiftly toward her sibling. Rather than pepper her with vicious strikes, however, she seemed to simply tap where she would have hit with a finger, letting the digit glide and poke at the spots with amusement.

More annoyed than focused on the task of defeating Ryuuko, Satsuki endeavors to keep up to speed, straining her body even more. Bakuzan Gako flashes; Ryuuko adjusts her position so that it collides against its twin. A flurry of hand strikes rushes to her, and the former dictator uses her short blade to deflect each and every one of them. The brainwashed girl is not unnerved. In fact, her grin only grew wider with every blindingly fast strike the elder parried or swatted aside. She laughs, and the ex-three-star student presses forward.

She sees the childish way Ryuuko wordlessly insults her in between dodges, the way she lingers for a thousandth of a second longer with every move as if begging Satsuki to hit her. The image of a childhood with Ryuuko as company briefly flits through her thoughts, and she sees it in the way the former delinquent coyly dodges and playfully flaunts her body, the smile that holds no malice behind it and the arch in her back that suggests she feels something more than hatred towards her, even in the middle of combat.

Overgrown fingernails sharpened into pseudo-claws lightly rake up her abdomen, and she freezes as a ripple of displeasure runs down her spine. Ryuuko clucks her tongue in mock-disappointment and throws a punch, averting at the last second and letting her first merely brush against the taller girl's bangs when she fails to dodge in time.

"Too slow, sis."

Satsuki doesn't see Ryuuko, as the next thing she knows, she's put into a headlock and can't escape. She corkscrews, but the brainwashed girl merely lets her go briefly before replacing the headlock. Catch and release seems to be a major part of Ryuuko's game, for every time the sleep deprived elder makes a mistake, she merely puts her in a temporary headlock before letting her go. When Satsuki manages to hit her, she shrugs it off no matter how bone-shattering the hit was and speeds up, if only a little. Throughout their duration of their fight, she never once draws either of the blades in her possession, instead preferring to spring about and tap her sister's bared skin like an overgrown toddler on caffeine.

Slowly but surely, Satsuki keeps up with her. Ryuuko no longer can touch her quite as much as she did in the beginning, and the former finds their play to be refreshing. Strategies are analyzed, and movements filed away on both ends. Soon, the older of the two finds that she is quite adept at analysis on her own, being able to register the small twitches and movements that precede certain attacks and counter appropriately. Their dance seems to stretch on for many hours, when in reality it has barely passed one. Satsuki carries herself through sheer force of will, powering through the exhaustion and the dwindling supply of blood to continue "fighting".

Her luck effectively ends when her Shippu transformation unexpectedly ends and she is rendered practically unable to move minutes later, having run out of available blood to use without the kamui dipping deep into reserves best left untouched for her life's sake. Like a puma, the shorter girl rears up and pounces, somehow managing to pin her sibling despite the differences in weight and height.

Satsuki instinctively freezes. Memories of a childhood long past flash before her, and she sees Ryuuko- no, Ragyou- lean over her and ghost her hands down her front, stopping at her flanks. Ryuuko leans forward, intending on biting into her skin and drinking the remaining life-blood that thrummed within her veins. She advances for no reason other than because she wanted to taste life, to taste the will and domineering persona that made Satsuki so very different from the rest of the humans turned soft from generations within the comforts of a modern living, humans whose grasp on life was weak and without real meaning behind it. Senketsu warily watches her approach, feeling her breath condensing on the slick dark material in patches of gray-white before fading away at the edges.

Just as the tips of her canines brushed against the flesh of the older Kiryuuin's neck, a curious thing happened.

Ryuuko stopped.

She stared. A vacant glaze formed over her perceptive gaze, and Satsuki thought she imagined her younger sister's eyes water, if not only for a fraction of a second.

She moved her neck so that her head bore down towards the pinned teen's chest, and lightly buried her nose into the red cloth that somehow managed to stay wrapped around the other during the scuffle. A guttural noise vibrated the air, and it took the older sibling all of three seconds to realize that Ryuuko- of all people in the world- was purring. In her shock, the latter took advantage of the situation and used her weight to cement her hold, lowering her body against her sister's and further sniffing the filthy scarf.

Satsuki pauses, and she sees it in the way her body stiffens and the next breath hitches in her chest, the way her eyes dilate with every sniff, a red swath becoming nothing more than a thin ring pushed aside by a dark pool in its center. She sees something indescribable flash before her in those orbs so much like their mother's, and she does not fail to catch the subtle tremble that had passed by reddened, chapped, dry lips like a bolt of lightning. Satsuki sees all and deems it proof beyond any measure that Ryuuko is still there, still waiting, still bound by the red threads of fate that had pulled her life apart so much. And as sudden as the stiffening happens, it disappears, and her younger sister's body uncharacteristically slackens in her presence for the first time. Blood-coated hands move from their chokehold and slide down to lightly rest atop the her collarbones, fingertips touching the ground below.

She can almost see the pieces connecting together within the peculiar gear-shaped eyes, as if she was trying to remember something that she had forgotten long ago. Her expression turns wistful, and the furrowing lines on her face make her look so conflicted, so sad, and so utterly lost that Satsuki cannot help but feel something stir within her chest and tug at her heart within. With her teeth, Ryuuko lightly grabs hold of the scarf and pulls it free from her sister's neck, gently holding it in her mouth as if it were made of eggshells. She drops it into a waiting hand, where fingers rub circles into the mass-produced cotton garment, feeling and re-feeling the material over and over again, as if willing herself to burn the sensation into her memory.

Her weight cascades off of Satsuki as she sits upright and leans back slightly, mindlessly continuing her ministrations. By now, all thoughts of fighting have long since fled her tortured mind, and she is content to stare at the red fabric with equally red eyes, back pressed against a stack of old girders left to rust.

"Ryuuko..." Senketsu murmurs, but the girl pays no heed to him.

Satsuki meanwhile watches her carefully, noting her sudden docility, and she wants to take advantage of the momentary distraction, to assume control of the situation once more and finally tip the scales in humanity's favor. It is what she had learned after living with a devil of a mother- how to seize back control whenever possible, even for the most minor things. A cruel half of her forged and refined once over by thirteen years' worth of stress over an impossible war against the life fibers wants to pin the unaware girl before her underfoot, to

crush her mind and force her subservience and loyalty against the aliens she was brainwashed into groveling to. Maybe, if they kept her in captivity, kept her bound and blinded and away from the madness, they could peel away the damage layer by layer, slowly dissect through the insanity, and reach the Ryuuko buried within. It would be difficult to transport her to the ship without her escaping or attempting to murder everyone in sight, but the benefit of a life fiber hybrid on their side and another kamui was almost too much to give up. Almost. Mind whirring, she thinks of a plan, hedging her bets on the girl's new obsession with the filthy fabric to notice.

Six. The time to strike is when the opportunity presents itself.

She knows from newly gained experience that Ryuuko won't be deceived by anything temporary in nature, so she tries to change her entire demeanor to match her sister's calmed one, and only shifts her position enough so that she too appears nonchalant. If she noticed Satsuki's movements, Ryuuko doesn't do anything, and it outwardly appears as the action hadn't registered within her consciousness at all, much to the elder's well-hidden delight.

She moves to attack, to strike a crushing blow to the back of her sister's head in hopes of temporarily knocking her out. Then, and only then would they be able to keep her harmless in a sleeping state, perhaps by injecting a biologically compatible equivalent of the coagulants they used on Junketsu so many months ago. Careful so as to not prematurely alert Ryuuko of her plans, she stalks closer around the edge of the former's peripheral vision. But her efforts are in vain, for somehow, Ryuuko senses her movement and moves to block it with a hand. Golden tassels move with lengthening black hairs, whipping in the resulting strike. Her one red streak bobs, and her eyes flare in anger.

Satsuki feints, shooting a hand directly at the shorter teen's face and moves to attack while her attention is diverted elsewhere, but Ryuuko sees through the fake and punishes her greatly for it. The smaller girl's hands wrap around her sister's neck, and Satsuki is lifted off the ground as Ryuuko angrily rises to her feet, rage simmering in the depths of her red irises. For the umpteenth time that day, Satsuki's body parts with the Earth and she is sent sailing through the air, landing against the side of a modern office building.

Satsuki slams through the façade, skidding to a halt on the mildewed carpeting. Glass rained down about her, pelting her bare skin and cutting vibrant streaks red as her sister's eyes and hair. Senketsu tries to prevent himself from transforming back into his deactivated state, protecting its wearer and falling back on previously drawn blood to consume. Ryuuko arrives not a moment later, plowing them through one crumbling ceiling after another, until they arrive on the roof.

"You're a girl that's just being worn by her kamui," Satsuki hisses in a last ditch effort to build off on the younger girl's unexpected behavior, to further weaken Junketsu's hold.

The scarlet scissor blade snaked between Satsuki's skin and Senketsu. Junketsu's wearer glowered at both of them before a sharp tug ripped at the black kamui's fabric, the clothing instantly shredded amidst the black sailor fuku's sharp cries of agony. Ryuuko released her grip on her older sister, letting her collapse under her weight as pitiful shreds of the black cloth fluttered around her.

“Senketsu!”

“Synchronization, my ass. You’re just the one that’s being worn by her kamui. You couldn’t even master Junketsu.” Ryuuko snarled, solidly planting a foot on the incapacitated girl’s abdomen and hefting Bakuzan Kouryuu up. Her other foot finds its home atop the taller girl’s hand, forcing her to relinquish her grip on the small dagger.

Satsuki could only watch in muted horror as the scene so much like that of her dream earlier that day replayed before her eyes, unable to do anything. Then with a whistle, the blade slammed against her head and she knew no more.

Ryuuko watched as Satsuki’s body suddenly went limp, all tension in her body leaving in one fluid move. She remained still even when the other kamui wearer nudged her with a foot. Ryuuko licked her lips. Out cold, then.

Victory doesn’t taste as good to her as it would have. Victory gained from actual combat would be so much sweeter, but this was really just a test to gauge the other’s strength, to touch her- for research, of course. Surreptitiously learning her fighting style and discovering how to combat it was the second thing on her list of priorities at the moment. The only reason why she acted as she did was because her thoughts weren’t clouded over with the insane urge to kill, to mercilessly slaughter in the most messiest ways possible. Either way, her superiority was ultimately proven, and it was the only the matter of whether to dispose of such a pest, or keep it.

Mother would kill for the chance to have Satsuki back in her possession in addition to another god robe, but Ryuuko is less willing to shoulder the burden and even less willing to hand over the object of her fascination. As much as she is loathe to admit it, Satsuki is the only one worthy of meeting her in combat, and is not one to be just offered up to the life fibers like commoners. So she gathers the pieces of the black kamui up, and looks at it. She arranges the pieces as they were before their destruction, giving herself a small cut and sprinkling the few drops of blood over it. And slowly but surely, the god robe repairs itself, assembling into its default form before her. Together, they stare at each other in a silent standoff, not quite knowing what to say.

“Ryuuko,” the kamui begins again, but she is already gone, disappearing in a whirlwind of white cloth.

She leaves their presence if but only for a moment, needlessly crashing through the walls and floors of more than several damaged buildings with practiced ease before finding what she wanted- a hospital. She remains within the adult wings if but for a minute, taking with her a moderately sized blanket, a first-aid kit, a ripped box of white packets, and a rag hastily bunched together to resemble something akin to a cushion. On her way back, she sifts through the floor Satsuki first landed on, finding her blade amidst the wreckage.

With more tenderness than she originally intended to display, she lifts her defeated rival’s head and nudges the poor excuse of a pillow under the disheveled mop of hair. Ryuuko doesn’t know where the sudden gentleness and concern for her enemy’s health comes from, and it disgusts her, so she takes it out on the ice packs instead. Her fist crashes against the

white package, crushing the crystalline substance inside over and over to gain maximum coverage. The coldness the chemical reaction brings soon comes to the surface, and she lays it against her sister's head, repeating the process with the remaining four ice packets inside. The cuts sustained from her rampage are slathered in gauze and hastily wrapped with the stolen rolls of medical tape.

When she is done, she realizes that the red scarf that she had been previously examining not to long ago had managed to get caught on her two blades. She scowls at it, no longer caring for the unusual spell it held over her mere minutes ago. Satsuki's blood is mopped with it, and the ice packs were secured in its hold. Gently, she places the blanket over her and tucks it under her body, brushing a long bang out of the way.

She doesn't mean to, but she stays, keeping vigil. She even presses the dagger into her unconscious enemy's hand and guards her against the roaming hordes of gathering COVERS, protectively stepping over the older girl's body and growling that they should find sustenance somewhere else, loudly declaring this human was hers to do with as she pleased. They obey her, of course, and are soon drawn to a disturbance somewhere nearby. Like birds, they fly off in their air with a flutter of cloth wing-sleeves, leaving the three alone.

Ryuuko suddenly remembers the presence of the other god robe, who had been silently watching her throughout her ministrations. She suddenly feels exposed, analyzed like a common lab rat in some inane scientific experiment. Her cheeks flush red with emotion, burning brightly.

"Are you listening, kamui?" Ryuuko demanded, whipping around and glaring at the dark clothing with as much concentrated hatred as she could muster.

Senketsu merely looked at her wearily, blinking slowly and voicing one word to indicate in the affirmative. It was no use to try to talk her out of the brainwashing- surely his and Satsuki's latest attempts had proved it over again. Ryuuko sat back, satisfied.

"Good. When she awakens, tell her that her life spared only for my amusement." She leans in closer, calmly locking red pupils with a similarly hued one. "She may challenge my power again only when she proves herself."

Senketsu doesn't answer, but he can tell something has changed within her, something that was present even before the incident with the scarf and the aftercare she provided. It was there in the way she moved and the way she acted, present in the charged air between them that relieves the god robe and makes it inwardly beam happily. It takes a titanic effort for him not to crack a smile even as she leaves them for good this time, vanishing in the distance and becoming nothing more than a single white speck among a yellow backdrop.

It's like his Ryuuko was coming back to him again, if not in fragments.

"swer..."

A voice buzzed in her ear. She knit her brows in concentration. It sounded familiar, but yet... she could not place her finger on the person's identity.

She drifted in and out of consciousness. Sometimes, she saw a white looming figure above her, and although she tried to tense her muscles in preparation for defending against an attack, her body was practically unable to do anything else but contort her facial expression into a grimace. It leaned over her and gently brushed the hair out of her eyes before tenderly tucking something around her. Her eyes rolled back, head lifted temporarily and dropped onto something softer.

“Sats...”

She wanted to reach out and touch it. To talk to it maybe. She knew she was dying, if not already dead. Fingers twitched, yearning to make contact with the divine being and maybe- maybe- finally be at peace at the world.

But this world...

it still needed her. To triumph over the demon-woman and free the world from the life fiber's clutches. To bring her sister, the one she had devoted thirteen years of her life scheming a revenge for, back to her senses.

To give up without a fight and to accept such a possibility of a defeat so readily, just to escape her titanic burden...

She knew it was a selfish thought.

“-uki ... Sa... tsuki...”

She woke to a splitting headache. A pale alabaster arm littered in scars and cuts from battles past and present moves up the dark waterfall of hair, eventually coming into contact with the stained scarf and a cascade of no-longer-cool ice packs. It is evening now, and tendrils of warm orange and dull yellow fill the skies. Finally noticing the thin blanket that covered her body before ungracefully sliding from her shoulders and pooled around her legs, she pulled it up again, trying to cover as much of her naked form as possible.

‘When did that get there?’

“Satsuki.”

She is startled once more by the noise, and she instinctively raises the dagger that somehow was placed in her hands to the source of the noise. Her blade is almost met by the worried face of one kamui Senketsu, who eyes the life fiber hardened weapon nervously and gives a little hop of fright away. She sighs and lets her hand drop, both relieved for her life and that of the god robe that “stood” next to her.

“Senketsu. What happened?”

The eye blinked and the god robe visibly sagged, as if sighing as well. It- no, he- looks at her, and tries to convey his thoughts in their most condensed form. His speech still comes out fragmented, but this time, she has to only ask him once to repeat himself.

“Ryuuko won. She defeated us singlehandedly in combat, and I... was shredded to pieces. She left a while ago, though, heading...” He pauses, gazing into the landscape and narrowing his one eye. “...Southeast, I believe, judging by our location in regards to the ocean.”

Satsuki shifts, uncomfortable. Her ears prick for any sign that her little sister is still lurking about, but they return with nothing. She moved to sit upright, ignoring the sudden onslaught of vertigo, but the kamui checks her with a single word. So she relaxes, opting to fully lay back and watch clouds lazily pass by. Her fingers check over her wounds finding them tended to, albeit sloppily and in the most Ryuuko-like way possible. She coughs, and bruised ribs uncomfortably wince with every exhale.

“That doesn’t explain why she didn’t just kill us.”

“No. She stayed for quite a bit, even going so far as to fetch you ice packs and... order packs of COVERS away, I believe. The only reasonable explanation is combat data.”

She hums thoughtfully and belatedly realizes that the only thing meaningful to all three of them is the ruined city of Osaka, and feels a sick sense of triumph in knowing that the brainwashing isn’t fully impermeable. Perhaps she planted the seed of rebellion. Perhaps she had fanned the flames of discontent, touched the consciousness within, and slowly but surely parted the veil that blinded her. And she wants to travel there, to further break through the hold the kamui and their “mother” has on her, but Senketsu protests and refuses to be worn in his activated state, believing her health to be more important at the moment.

Houka’s voice came into her ear the next second, saturated with anxiety and effectively cutting off whatever trailing thoughts she had in regards to the matter.

“-tsuki...? Lady Satsuki, please come in! I repeat, please come in!"

"Houka?" she murmurs back, suddenly remembering the bead in her ear.

"Oh, Lady Satsuki! Thank goodness! Sanageyama and Gamagoori departed a while ago to retrieve you, but they encountered a larger-than-usual horde of COVERS. You had been in extended combat with Matoi, and when you didn’t respond, I thought you dead. They were very adamant on getting to you, even if it cost their own lives in the process.”

“Tell them I’m fine,” Satsuki replies. “I need transportation back to the jet ski, however.”

“Understood. Patching them through.”

The joy-filled shouts of the rest of her elites soon reach her ear, and she smiles as they share in their relief. Quite strangely, she doesn't even care that they had uncharacteristically disobeyed her orders to save her life. In her mind, she works to break her sister free of her brainwashing, a plan already forming.

一心流 / Isshin-ryū was what “Down the Road” was supposed to be renamed as. I am actually a practitioner of that karate style (participated before DTR was conceived) and several bits of what I learned were assigned to Satsuki’s traits.

Senketsu somehow being in one piece after being ripped off Satsuki mirrors what was shown in series when Ryuuko did it while mind-controlled. Perhaps it was because she was using the blunt end of the blade rather than specifically slicing him apart like what Nui did. Here, I made it so that he can only spontaneously reassemble himself without extraneous help (ie: being sewn back together) if he has an adequate blood supply and if the cutting edges of the scissors/Bakuzan/etc. aren’t used to rip him apart.

Concrete and Gold

Chapter Summary

TL;DR: Nui does stuff. Implied sexy times with Ryuuko later ensue.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Encephalic/Encephalonic Disassociation (n.): insanity; lobotomy/lobectomy; a well-placed headshot. ***

“Nui? Where’s Ryuuko?”

Ragyou’s lilting voice floats through the space between them, and for the first time in her life, Nui doesn’t know what to say. Should she lie and tell her that Ryuuko was out hunting, or that she was making her rounds and swelling the size of the army of COVERS to include those nosy people from other lands poking their business into their territory? She doesn’t know, and unconsciously voices it.

“I don’t know.”

The faint line of the CEO’s mouth curls down the slightest bit, and the pink-clad blonde suddenly gets the eerie feeling that it was the wrong thing to say. It’s almost scary how the older woman could cow her such a subtle move, and she freezes in her seat, remaining petrified like a mouse facing a predator. Ragyou merely runs her fingers through the feathered boa resting on her elbows, pretending to brush off a speck of invisible dust in the process.

“In that case, I’ll have to speak to her when she comes back. I do realize this isn’t the first time she has done this, but I’d like to know where my darling daughters are all the time. It worries me when they suddenly go off like that without telling me beforehand.”

Nui hums in agreement and gives her creator a small smile, turning her attention back to the enormous designs laid before her. She knows what Lady Ragyou said was a lie, a falsehood carefully cloaked in the visage of motherly concern. She knows smiling and agreeing completely as the only way to get the older woman off her back. Ragyou sidles up beside her, taking in the awe-inspiring sight of the massive kamui in the making. Her frown is almost instantly replaced with a smirk, and an eager sheen soon decorates scarlet irises.

“How is your pet project going along?”

The air is thick and heavy, saturated with the overwhelming scent of florals and perfume, of Ragyou's heavy musk and breath. This time, Nui answers truthfully, the words easily flowing from her now that the pressure to lie, to disobey, has receded.

“Very well! The damage those naked apes have done forced me to replace most of the fabric, but it shouldn’t take more than a few days at most until it's finished!”

Ragyou’s grin only gets wider, and it makes her look like a cat that had caught sight of its next meal.

“That’s good news, my dear. I fear having to wear something those... pigs... in human clothing touched, as my own dear mother would have said. I’m sure your expert craftsmanship will shine through. Then, the addition of a certain someone will complete it, make it outshine any of those dreadful *rags* they have ever conceived.”

Nui isn’t listening, however. She has other things on her mind. Thoughts of the finished kamui and of a certain girl with an ill temperament. Worries unbecoming of her. A fleeting fear that her new-found sister would be used to power the god robe in Satsuki's place, given how life fibers fed on resentment and rage, and the dark well that lay within every person's heart.

“Satsuki?”

The Kiryuuin matriarch quirks a white brow in bemusement at the uncharacteristic small tremble the blonde's chipper voice possessed, a similar expression plastering her face soon after and mixing terribly with the sneer previously adorning it when she realizes the true meaning of her question. Then, the last thing either of them expected happened - she chuckled, low and methodical. A hand reached out and stroked the seamstress' bangs. Like a snake, she slithered closer, letting her breath brush against the girl's skin.

“Getting attached to little Ryuuko, are we?” There is that laugh again, and it sounds so condescending that it takes all of the pink-clad girl's willpower to suppress the urge to point it out. “No, I just want to have a talk with her.”

“She is a predictable creature, and her wants and urges are as predictable as the rising of the sun. She lives to fight, and she isn’t choosy with her opponents; why, she had even fought some of our prototype COVERS last week. Perhaps she found more of the nudist dogs and toyed with them for her own amusement. Or perhaps she’s out fighting Satsuki right now, bringing her down as we speak.”

The sneer came back.

"... Ho ho ho... Wouldn’t that be something?" A small exhale, and the brief gift of a moment of silence. "I have a feeling she will return to us sooner than you think.”

Nui agrees, twirling a singular strand of red in her dexterous fingers and putting the last finishing touches on a sleeve. The emptiness of words unexchanged stretches between the two women, and it startles the girl when the elder speaks again. Almost.

"It looks marvelous, my dear. Satsuki will be a fine addition." A small, exaggerated sigh "...If only she was more predisposed to rage like your other dear sister, then perhaps it could be even more powerful. But she will be an excellent offering regardless."

She leans even closer, glossy lips nearly touching a perfect ear.

"I can't wait to see how it looks on me."

The Grand Couturier smiles, and compliments her on her figure, choosing to ignore the other parts of her statement. She indulges her fantasies and plays the role of the good little girl she was born to fulfill - the daughter Lady Ragyou never had until weeks ago. It is all she can do. After all, if the bird flies to the hunter's hand, would they spare its life?

Despite the enormity of the room, she can't help but feel that whenever her mother is present, it shrinks and compresses about her, confining her in a gilded cage and stringing her up for display like a museum piece. A trophy, something to look pretty and sit on a shelf for others to gawk at and praise its owner on obtaining. It unnerves her.

She doesn't want to dwell on it, but it is like a ghost, hanging about her and lurking behind every closed door, every shadow she makes, and every action she does.

Three hours later, mop of very messy, very dark hair rests perfectly in her lap, and she is grateful for the warmth it provides. A light snoring emanating from the sleeping girl's throat is all but drowned out by the racket above as COVERS rake their claws against crudely formed harp strings, so very much alike how their brethren did mere weeks ago to awaken her, to unleash the beast within. The noise resembles that of sheet metal being chucked through a woodchipper with an ensemble of yowling cats in the background, but Ryuuko thinks it beautiful and easily falls asleep to its sound. So Nui tolerates the distraction and lets Ryuuko's lullaby fill the air between the sea of monotonous needle clicks and chattering machines.

Sleeping fascinates her, and she watches the white-clothed chest move up and down in a steady rhythm, the way her eyes twitch sometimes, and the utterly carefree look of serenity that rarely was plastered on her features otherwise. The way she openly shows such *weakness* in front of who she thought was her enemy and gladly surrenders her life to her. It's almost beautiful.

Ryuuko hasn't told her where she had been for the entire day. Not that Nui particularly cared of course; Ryuuko tended to go out and do whatever she pleased just as she did - at least, that was the explanation Nui offered herself to make the situation less offensive to her psyche. But it was a total surprise when she arrived about an hour ago, having all but kicked down the heavy metal doors leading to the private room and bellowed her arrival. She was covered in ashes and soot and at least two dozen other things that the seamstress wasn't sure she wanted to identify. An even larger shock came when she plopped down beside her shaking and trembling in poorly concealed rage - demeanor wild and more short-tempered than usual. It was clear something had greatly agitated her but the hybrid remained silent, refusing to even hint on what it was.

She prods the red-streaked girl awake, giggling when the other shoots her a dissatisfied glare and wipes away the lingering trail of saliva hanging from her lips. The first questions were more relaxed, Nui falling into a newly-created routine to soften her up, to make her more willing to respond to her sharp tongue and pointed questions. It doesn't work this time, however, and the taller girl grows more impatient as the questioning drags on longer than her liking, the way the blonde tries to probe heedless of growled-out one-word answers. It was only a matter of time before her tongue slips, and a round of barbed accusations begins, always presented in that special, almost jovial way of hers.

She knew she was playing with fire, knew that she should stop and apologize immediately. But her kind does not apologize, and so she continues her antagonization, poking and prodding at parts much too recent to have been from anything that could have come from the trips they shared together.

She doesn't notice the red-streaked girl's twitching until it is too late.

Ryuuko snarls and easily picks her up, slamming the blonde against the wall in a fit of impertinent rage. An imprint soon decorates the plaster surface, somehow including the shape of the twin drill pigtails the smaller girl possessed. She is stunned, and stars wink in and out of her vision, taking the place of blurred edges and dancing spots. Before she can do anything, Ryuuko's lips are upon hers once more, and her mind curiously blanks at the situation. She doesn't care that she too is being covered in the gray powdery dust that blanketed her sister's body. Senses go numb and interrogative intents are forgotten as the gap between them is closed once more, for her kiss is hungry and savage, and the pretense of gentleness is easily destroyed.

A hand palms her legs and brush against them over and over, slow and sensual, teasing her relentlessly. Nui wriggles and allows the older of the two to have better access, watching as the other marveled at the creamy skin tone and impossible silky smooth texture. A tongue runs over them soon after, the act punctuated with a series of sharp nips that easily breaks skin. The pink muscular organ laps it up eagerly, becoming tinted a bright red in the process. Ryuuko's touches are as violent as Lady Ragyou's, if not moreso. She is unforgiving in the way she deals out her ministrations, and it excites her, a raw animalistic feeling of primal pleasure. But there is a hidden gentleness behind the action, a certain sense of caring that wasn't present in the CEO's touches and it made the entire situation more bearable. It is in the way her technique shifts, the way she feels her lover's body and scrutinizes the way it responds adjusts accordingly to make sure her partner receives the most pleasure from the act. It reminds her of their first shared intimate moment, and the thought of stealing away Ryuuko's first meaningful kiss makes her heart flutter in selfish glee.

She did truly mean it when she had said that what the brainwashed girl lacked for in experience, she made up for in technique. The way her body arched and breathy whines escaped from her lent credence to the statement. In fact, it was almost criminal how much Ryuuko spoiled her!

Ryuuko thinks this is what she had done often in her brief life, so she continues her teasing for as long as she feels like before boldly pressing her advantage and rendering the seamstress unable to do much but moan aloud and convulse. She squeezes taut mounds of

flesh, and kisses her again, moving a free hand between the other's thighs. She switches her approaches soon after the tailor shifted position, caressing and biting until the pink-clad girl seizes and cries, until she runs empty and the cocktail of dangerous emotions overfills its cup. The space in the titanic room that had been saturated with tension is now doused with the overwhelming musk of pleasure, and it serves well in fully calming the younger girl down.

The former delinquent relinquishes her grip, guiding Nui to the floor as she recuperates. The euphoria of her recent orgasm soon fades away, and she is left breathless and cold, childish dark blue pupils still dilated from near-painful arousal. The Grand Couturier doesn't move, and the brainwashed girl takes it as a sign to spoon her, pushing her body behind the smaller girl's and snaking her arms around a thin waist. Nui lets her. It doesn't bother her when Ryuuko does it, and she idly wonders why. There is something special in the way the girl holds her that the memory of Ragyou's ministrations pales in comparison. Having Ryuuko's breasts press against her with every breath she took certainly helped matters quite a bit.

Their chests are heaving. The last notes from the COVERS orchestra flit through the air, and the taller of the two fights off the urge to slowly slip into a dreamless sleep once more, resting her head on a pink-clad shoulder. Her head bobs as the events of the day catch up to her once more, the temporary excitement of Nui's interruption fading away in spurts. The shorter blonde easily remains awake and gently guides her half-asleep older sister back to the workbench, allowing her to spoon her once more once they settled down. Resuming her normal perched positioning on the furniture, she makes sure to keep Ryuuko's hands wrapped around her, wads of raw life fiber cloth clenched in her own ones.

She wants to put a leash, a collar on her- anything to mark this lovable idiot as hers; the scars she helped make permanent were a declaration to a faceless entity, not one in particular, and she wants to correct that. She wants the hybrid's absolute loyalty- no, demands it. She thinks of making one with pink lacy fabric, with "リユウリユウ" in the center in flowing, elegant red script. She giggles. Certainly the girl wouldn't have minded. She imagines Ryuuko, her Ryuuko with rippling muscles and flared hair, wearing an activated Junketsu and covered in blood with a frilly pink collar around her neck. *'How trite'*, she thinks, and dismisses such thoughts. But she wants to do it anyway. In fact, right before she caught her hands in the act, they were already autonomously weaving a small band of fabric into such a shape.

The chattering of the sewing machines starts up again. The legion of mind-stitched sewing club members wordlessly tend to her unspoken whims, loading up spools of life fibers and crafting the smaller pieces of the god robe. She loses herself in her work once more, and idle thoughts came at such idle times.

Nothing Nui has belongs to her, not even her own body. She had willingly gave up the dream of being autonomous ever since she was old enough to think independently, and gladly sacrificed her body in the name of Lady Ragyou's ideals. The thought hasn't occurred to her until now, and she uncharacteristically ponders if Lady Ragyou had only allowed the degree of chaotic freedom she possessed if to satiate her unconscious demand for the actual thing.

Sixteen years of quiet servitude smother the line of thought like a save of unyielding tar, and it is easily wiped from her consciousness in a broad stroke not unlike the ones she favored

using with her purple scissor sword.

And yet, something stirs inside her and brings long-dead feelings to the surface.

She wants.

Needs.

Wishes.

An unknown monster preys at the back of her mind, scratching away at the mental defenses she had spent so long building up with its claws. It is serpentine in nature, and the language of lies is its natural tongue. Was it a dragon, like in the stories her creator used to tell her when she was just a child when espousing her perverse ideals? She said that the dragon was a sign of the end times, that it would rain a third of the stars back down to Earth and bring destruction. Ryuuko was a dragon. Ryuuko killed and rent asunder with glee. It was not by choice, but Ryuuko was that dragon.

That dragon was hate, and if hate and love were two sides of the same coin, would that make her a spouse of lies as well? And if love was in hate, and hate in love, would it be so far-fetched to think that her sister would love her as much as she did?

Her chest constricts with an unknown emotion, and it disgusts her how human it feels.

The girl trusting her life in her hands at the moment wouldn't have done so in normal conditions, yes, but Ryuuko, even when brainwashed, is the first thing she can say she owns - if not partly. The thought comes so sudden and unexpectedly; she takes a moment or two to fully process the implications. She actually owns something. Something that willingly offers themselves to her as much as she does to others. Something she loved and returned that same love with as much eagerness as she herself possessed.

They are so much like each other, the same breed of monster, and yet they are as different as sand and surf, of land and of sea. It's almost perfect - a textbook relationship. Opposites attract, after all. But she wants, she craves the entire thing to herself. To be the sole proprietor of this ball of rage, this powerhouse that never knew her full potential until recently, and even that limit was exceeded far beyond her wildest expectations. To be the only person that Ryuuko longs for and responds to. To be her guardian and she hers. Then they would both be happy, intertwining around each other in this twisted, incestuous relationship of theirs.

Black is not an appropriate color for a bride. Black represented rebellion, the fires of a revolution in the making. True freedom. Change. Ryuuko had worn that color with pride, if not with red accents to highlight how she was unafraid to spill blood if push came to shove. They were resentful of that which she represented and stood for, fearful even. So they dressed her in white and wed her to life fibers in a carefully planned "matrimony". They clipped her wings and bound her to the earth, taken away her godhood and replaced it with a mockery of itself in the midst of whispers of pleasure and power, of the truth and of the meaning of everything in the universe. They opened her eyes. They blinded her. They gave her life and simultaneously took hers away, stealing her purpose in the world and molding her to theirs.

But Nui wants to be Ryuuko's only reason for living, the only one she is bound to and the only one her attentions and ministrations are centered upon. She wants to be Ryuuko's groom and fit her into a wedding dress specifically designed for someone of her caliber. She wants to kiss her again, to taste once more the pure sin of mankind that the red-streaked girl had the blessing to encounter a short while ago. The need is so overwhelming that she almost takes the red streaked girl right then and there to sweep her off her feet and continue this dangerous tango, this dance both of them have been playing since their first meeting so long ago. But she hesitates, and the girl remains unconscious of her turbulent thoughts. It's almost poetic how unaware and yet hyperaware she is of everything.

In the short span of their time together, Ryuuko had taught her the meaning of true love, bestowed upon her the priceless gift of finally being heard. Nui wants Ryuuko to give her heart only to her, to swear her undying loyalty and stand with her until the end of the world, when the earth is all but drowned in flames raining from the skies and as piles of corpses lie at their feet. She wants Ryuuko to desire only her attention, to be submissive only to her command. Then, and only then will the marital veil lift, and she will kiss her rightfully-claimed bride.

'If not,' she thinks, letting the brainwashed girl hold her a little more closer than usual and reveling in their shared moment, *'then let your affections be mine and mine alone.'*

Chapter End Notes

*** - Not an actual term. It is a pseudo-intellectual phrase I made up.

"Encephalic/Encephalonic" (relating to the brain) + "Disassociation" (the state of separation).

"リュウリュウ" - "RyuuRyuu". Obvious pet name. Hopefully it's correct in its Japanese translation/scribing.

卧虎藏龍

Chapter Summary

TL;DR: Ryuuko begins to doubt her allegiance.

Chapter Notes

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon = 卧虎藏龍

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

『围兵必阙』

『敌间之来间我者，因而利之，导而舍之，故反间可得而用也』

("To a surrounded enemy, you must leave a way of escape")

"It is essential to seek out enemy agents who have come to conduct espionage against you and to bribe them to serve you. Give them instructions and care for them. Thus doubled agents are recruited and used")

In their tongue- in her tongue, even- they called her ‘The Snow Hunter’, for her kamui was white and its entire being pure as the snowfall. ‘Hakuma’, for her horns and garb. ‘The Midnight Rider’, for her uncanny aptitude for navigating the dark recesses of the world and rooting them out in the odd hours of early morning. ‘The Red Death’, if they felt like being less creative than usual and just noted her singular red bang, curled perfectly in an arc like death’s scythe.

But those were all just titles. Unwanted flairs that sounded better placed on the spines of novels nobody would bother purchasing, much less sneak a peek at during their sojourn in a bookstore. They were, however, spoken from parents to their children in hushed whispers whenever they thought they felt her shadow pass over them. And in a sense, she was, for she was like a shepherd that corralled these sheep, these pigs in human clothing, to their own demise.

But neither 'The Snow Hunter', the 'Hakuma', 'The Midnight Rider', or 'The Red Death' were here at the moment. Ryuuko was, however. For ‘Ryuuko’ was the name given to her by

Ragyou and Nui, and for Rei, the addition of “Lady” before her given denotation. And sometimes, when Ryuuko closed her eyes and lost herself in the bliss of the moment, she dreamed.

They weren’t anything particularly interesting- they fit into the schema of normal, uninteresting things. Attending school and walking through crowds of people hanging out in the courtyards after classes, nervously discussing test results and ducking under the trees for a shady spot to eat. Visiting local restaurants with her mother and attempting to try each menu item at least once. A hearth. A fireplace the butlers had let her curl up nearby during the bitter cold months of winter. Walking through a sparsely forested area for miles on end, craning her neck upward and watching the passing of flying birds or fluttering butterflies with great interest, turning her head if only to track their path. A fire. A conflagration that engulfed an entire building with one explosive sweep. Staring at pieces of lightly breaded, fried foodstuffs and marvelling at their taste. The hustle and bustle of everyday life as the household awoke and prepared itself for the new day. A woman welcoming her home after a long day at school just as the sun crept under the hills and the moon started its celestial journey through the heavens. A short-haired brunette unintentionally rolling next to her, burying her face deep into her stomach, and coating her pajamas in thick, slimy drool, unconsciously craving warmth in the snuggle.

Wait. Housefire? A noisy household? She didn’t remember having a woman other than her mother tend to her, nor did she remember having a brunette sleep next to her. She concentrated harder, getting frustrated when the images before her swam like fish in the water, the scenes before her eventually becoming too muddled to divine any further.

A short giggle catches her off guard. She tries to move her head, but found that every part of her suddenly hurt from her position on the ground, rendering her practically immobile. Dust swirled at her feet, obscuring her vision. She frowns as she racks her brain and tries to will herself to focus. When did the scene change? The mirthful noise rings out once more, and she instead turns her attention to a rapidly approaching figure, swathed in a frilly pink dress and sporting two freakishly large coiffed pigtails. Ryuuko blinks, stupefied.

Nui?

She doesn’t realize she voices her question aloud until the other practically dislocates her jaw to laugh, high pitched and girly. A sudden hostility overtakes her, and she wants nothing more than to rip the shorter girl’s throat out with her teeth, to torture her until nothing but a shell remains. The blonde beams at the incensed expression on the delinquent’s face, hefting her favored purple scissor sword with one fluid motion...

...and neatly bisects the girl down her middle.

Ryuuko screamed as her upper and lower halves almost parted ways, the thinnest scrap of flesh barely keeping her together along her back. Tears threatened to leak at the corner of her eyes, their bitter salt stinging her mouth as lips parted for howls of agony. Nui merely giggled at the sight of Ryuuko’s exposed skeleton, gleefully crouching down and deliberately pushing her face against the anguished teen’s.

The pain, the *pain!*

“How pretty!” the life fiber creature chirps, watching her rival’s face twist into a gravely horrified expression, one of pure mortal terror, and she smiles widely, lips stretching wide across her face until they reach her eyes and pull her skin taut, threatening to burst it at the seams. “You look so beautiful, Ryuuko-chan!”

“**Ryuuko!**” she hears a distinctively masculine voice shout in concern, but in the haze of noise and uncontrollable shaking she cannot remember who it belonged to, nor could discern its point of origin amidst the hundreds of wailing voices that were crying out for help around her.

Time has stopped. Everything is muffled, sluggish. Her vision (which has since become noticeably fuzzier), her hearing, and even her sense of feeling was muted. Ryuuko coughed, a gurgled sound that grew louder in intensity as red iron-rich liquid collected in her lungs and pooled in her throat. She let her arm drop to her side as if it were a lead balloon and tipped her head back, waiting for the sweet embrace of death amidst seizures that painfully wracked her body.

...But it never came.

She saw red threads barely visible to the naked eye shoot out from her wounds amidst the torrent of blood that issued forth, sprawling and twisting along the ground like a demented version of slime mold growth. They drew closer to each other as if they were caught by a magnetic pull, entwining upon contact. Then, the knots tightened, and her halves started to heal, the skin stitching up and becoming whole once more.

She choked on her breath, horrified at the sight that lay before her as red liquid gushes forth from her mouth, splattering her front. A hand brought itself to the flesh tear, unbidden, and fingers stuck into the closing gash, bringing several glowing crimson strands to the surface with the slow curl of the two digits. Her pupils shrunk in horror, the most recent memory of her newly-declared mother neatly plunging a hand to her chest and mockingly appraising the life-fiber infused heart with unrestrained glee.

“*See, Ryuuko-chan~?*” Nui somehow managed to lean in even closer, pushing the kamui wearer onto her back and prodding at both halves on occasion with her sword tip in sick delight. “You’re not human at all. Nope, nope, nope! You’re made of life fibers. How amazing! Just like your mother!”

Then she was gone, skipping away merrily as a hail of jamming needles shot towards her, a small platoon of nudists clomping after her in battered mechs as she twirled and danced her way past. In the corner of her eye, she could see that monster of a mother casually bend down and snatch at Satsuki’s arms, dragging her out of her line of sight. Gravel crunched underfoot. She blinked, noticing for the first time a long smear of blood that trailed after her, spreading out and staining the soil a dark shimmering red like a great cape. Ryuuko didn’t realize she had been scooting away from the center of the wrecked stadium until her back hits a concrete wall. She let out a shaky breath, slowly raising a hand and paling visibly when it was entirely coated in red, when her entire lower half was coated in red. And despite being sundered and painting the arena in gallons of blood, she was still miraculously alive. There was no doubt about it now. Whatever batshit insane crap that bitch - her mother - said, it couldn't be anything but true. Which made her like Nui. Like Ragyou. Like the life fibers that that

damned woman was trying so hard to help in enslaving the human race. A ticking time bomb waiting to go off, a nuclear reactor about to go into meltdown.

“I’m human...” she found herself murmuring in denial, her pitifully small voice catching in her throat in the wake of catatonic shellshock as the last vestiges of the mortal wound sealed shut, leaving almost no trace of their former presence. She shivered, her body suddenly going cold and stiff. “I’m... human...”

“Ryuuko... that’s right...” the unknown voice speaks to her again as she starts to lose consciousness, the sound strangely comforting despite its perceived unfamiliarity. “You’re *human*. You’re the most human person I know... I would know, I’ve been worn by you... all this time...”

The resonating frequencies soothingly ripple above her chest, and she craves hearing it again. But the rolling horror of her inhumanity strikes her once more, bringing a frothing wave of self-denial, hatred, and panic to the forefront.

“I’m...”

She woke.

The world was hazy and muted, as if someone had put a blur filter over her eyes and plugged her ears. Like an infant, she moved her limbs sluggishly, blinking stupidly in the blinding light. Pain assaults her head, pressure mounting on her temples with brutal precision, making her easily believe that her head would soon explode. She feels like she is drowning, her mind easily overwhelmed by wave after wave of mental assault. She struggles under the crushing force, fleeing from it and stumbling-half blind to the oasis of relief that would permanently solve these problems that she knows exists and yet could not yet find. It hurts to blink. To move. To exist, even. She wails, the white of her dress magnifying every distressed movement.

Help!

A hand shook her out of her reverie. Ryuuko shrinks back and away from the tall figure, startled by the sudden movement. The groom standing next to her shifts position, lightly nudging her with the hand she just shrugged off. The way the light shone through the church’s windows framed his fair features perfectly, highlighted the white tuxedo with golden adornments around the shoulders and waist, and cast a fair halo above his white hair. A head cocked inquisitively, and she smiled gently- genially, even- the expression slipping the slightest bit at the suddenly cold breeze that snaked past the pews filled with her mother and the friends she had made in high school and college and caressed her face.

“Ryuuko...” a voice whispers through the church, and she is suddenly seized by the maddening need to rush outside and locate its source, an itch that crawls uncomfortably across her skin and pulls at her mind.

She stiffened, turning her head slightly to the pair of white doors that led out of the church and into a bright and sunny world. She thought she heard someone else call her name before she could mouth a small gasp, and she tips her head to the side the slightest bit in response.

And for a minute, the scene before her flickered and became unreal, as cartoonish as a mere dream. She blinks, and suddenly the pews are empty, the church stripped, and the man she just pledged her life to reduced to nothing more than a thread-faced mannequin standing at her side. She blinks several times in shock. A murmur arises from the gathered crowd, one of shared worry and disapproval. One foot raises, and then another, and she is almost completely off the altar and making a move to go to the door, but her arm is caught in her new husband's careful but firm grip. The instinctive urge to cry out and pull away fills her - one she barely manages to resist despite half her mind screaming at her to do so. A note of concern easily passes between them, as if they were bound together in more than one way, and she is suddenly plagued with indecision.

He pulls again, this time more lovingly, and she haltingly surrenders herself to his will, reascending the stone steps and letting the distance between them close by his arm around her slender waist. His forehead lightly bumps hers, and she sighs at the tender gesture, craning her head to the side to allow him better access to her neck, where he plants chaste kisses along its length. Abandoning the decision to investigate the intrusion, she lets him run a snow-colored glove through the dark strands of her hair and tie a long strand of practically shimmering thread around her pinky, his digit being similarly adorned by the same string. She represses the shudder that runs through the better part of her body at the sight of the strand, so very much like the one she saw replacing her husband's face.

Everything is calm now, not like the uneasy minutes before. He holds her tight, burying a chin into the golden crown mounted atop her head to the gleeful approval of those around them. The overwhelming need to rest washes over her, tidal waves of exhaustion causing her consciousness to ebb and recede as they crash against her mind.

'Five more minutes,' she thought, leaning against her beloved and almost quite easily slipping back into a dreamless sleep, snugly held in position by lithe, well-dressed arms.

Wake up.

She yawned. The warmth was making it hard to think. Maybe she didn't want to think, she stubbornly decides, further embedding herself within Junketsu's hold and wrapping his arms around hers.

Wake up.

The demand is more urgent this time, taking on the tone and inflection of her voice more and moreso, rough and grating in its vocalization. A tugging motion that feels like it's pulling at her very heart and mind accompanies the command. The last thing she sees is a singular concentric eye with a red iris and yellow sclera superimposed over her vision, staring disapprovingly at her with all the intensity of the sun before everything goes black. Then, the same two words ring out in her mind, and her very world shakes.

Wake up!

She bolts up from her resting place on Nui's lap with a muted scream, forehead nearly colliding with the table's underside.

“Ryuuko?”

She blinks stupidly, turning her head the slightest bit and nearly jumping a meter in the air upon locking eyes with her younger soul-sibling. She quickly scrambles back from the blonde in horror, eyes wide with terror as dreams and visions of seconds past flit before her once more. Her head is throbbing, her senses uncomfortably distorted, and her face unnaturally flushed, as if she had imbibed too much alcohol.

Nui’s face shifts, and it becomes a horrid thing to behold, melding the blonde’s own features with Ryuuko’s own. Straight, dark shoulder length hair that curls the slightest bit inward at the ends with no hints of the former delinquent’s roughened flared bangs frames her face rather than the two pigtails. Her eyepatch becomes more stylized, and extravagantly so, taking on swirls and shimmering pearly sheens. It is like looking into a mirror in a fun-house, and seeing a distorted future rather than a distorted body looking back at you, mocking you with a sneer and a not-so-subtle twinkle in their eyes. Then, it is gone, and with it, the awful sense of dark foreboding, the oppressive feeling that someone somewhere was plotting their specific downfall.

“Satsuki,” she finds herself whispering for some reason despite the traitor of a sibling having almost nothing to do with the recent haunts of late.

Her name is called again in worry, and she clammers from the steel bench both of them are perched on, practically running through the set of doors she had kicked in earlier on all fours like some sort of wild animal. She has to get out, *out*, **out**, far away from everything and everyone and every damn dream that screwed with her mind.

She doesn’t realize that she had crashed through a wall to escape and her feet had left the ground until Honnouji Academy becomes nothing more than an ugly blot sitting in the middle of Tokyo Bay. Acting on instinct rather than anything else, she lets her feelings guide her, navigate her past the empty streets in the Kanto region, and into a secluded wooded area where the burnt-out husk of a former mansion stood.

She lands on the grass with as much subtlety as a gigantic plush teddy bear rampaging through a small city. Trees shudder and seem to jump out of the ground upon impact. The space is quiet, peaceful even, in the way that nothing alive disturbs the picturesque scenery.

She hated it.

Ryuuko hated that she fled here, but loathed the simple fact that she came here whenever she was upset even more. So she walked and walked, not bothering to decide on a specific direction. Before long, she found herself at a grave, a peculiar spire rising a half-meter from the ground. Well, it would have been a grave had its unusual location not given it away as a mere memorial site, or a tribute to a deceased person at the very least.

For some reason she couldn’t quite explain, its very sight calmed her, soothed her thoughts as if a familiar friend or family member were with her, whispering comforting things in her ears. She finds it peculiar and willingly lets her guard down, thinking only of how it could have such an effect on her. A white stone plaque lies nearby the small spire, resting at its foot. It is

heavily damaged and illegible for the most part, for a crumbling brick wall had fallen atop it and reduced the design to rubble.

In expertly done calligraphy, as if a brush had moved over the smooth rock to form over the words themselves, it is inscribed:

*“The sto... home,
...pen...
...wal... Eart... ...ne...”*

Surprisingly, however, only one sentence remained intact. Bright red ink flows in the kanji’s engraved channels, a vast contrast from the otherwise monotonous text.

“There will always be a new day.”

She curls up by the small grave marker, a finger lazily tracing its inscriptions as well as those on the marble tablet. The former’s are hewn roughly and carved with great force, but it is easy to tell that a lot of thought went into creating it. Nothing graces the stone, save for a name, the dates of birth and death, and the kanji for the phrase “The Promise”.

She thumbs the name, wiping away months of grime from neglect.

“Matoi Isshin,” she reads.

She laughs, if only a little. It comes out sounding like a death rattle instead, and she doubles over as a coughing fit overtakes her. Matoi. ...Is that what Satsuki kept calling her? She smirks and bites into a yuzu she plucks from a twisted tree nearby, letting the juices flow freely down her chin. She lays back in the overgrown yard, chewing contentedly. For an odd reason, she can’t help but desire the yellow fruit to be more sour tasting, like a lemon. She bites again, swallowing fruit and skin. The dry, wispy touch of grass blades against the limited amount of skin she bares tickles her, but it is pleasing nonetheless.

She grabs a fistful of the dead vegetation and rips it free from the ground, scattering its withered brown corpses to the wind. She takes in a deep lungful of air, gazing at the sky and the passing clouds and the drifting bodies of cloth-form COVERS as they passed on by. Her back is wet, small puddles of still water from the rains the other day still present.

Come to think of it, for all the times she escaped here to get away whenever her thoughts turned treacherous, she had never stepped foot inside the old relic. Something pricked at the back of her neck, tugging her mind. She suddenly felt afraid at the thought, as if a heavy blanket of dread was suffocating her, filling her lungs and bringing great tremors to her knees.

And yet...

Her back straightened. Two slender legs positioned themselves above a rising torso, supporting its weight. One foot moved forward. Then another. Her body was moving on its own accord without her conscious input, until she walked past the entryway where surely two

great wooden doors would have been and into the burnt interior. She explores the inside, noting fallen plywood, visibly undamaged and bright in color, and casually nudges it with an instep. An attempt at boarding the place up to keep out vandals, she supposes, eyeing the graffiti decorating whatever vertical surface was left to rot. Obviously a concerned gesture, if not a wasted one.

Ryuuko continues her exploration, nimbly moving past a fallen grandfather clock that partially obstructed a doorway. She frowns, suddenly imagining the phantoms of the past as she looks upon a partially broken set of china resting atop a ruined cherry table nearby. Eyes trail upward, noting the soot-covered wallpaper and smashed windows, and fanciful images of the former inhabitant's daily life pass by her idly. The sound of crunching glass soon breaks her out of her reverie, however, and she pulls her foot away to reveal a battered picture that somehow managed to escape the worst of time and nature's wrath on the splintered wooden flooring.

Was that...?

She picks it up, mindful of the loosened shards. Her nose presses against shattered glass and broken wood, eyes boring holes into the tattered, partially burnt picture before it. It was a girl, presumably no more than six or seven years of age, standing next to a person with a long gray beard in a lab coat. She looked upset, eyes wearily cast to the ground and a forlorn frown bringing her lips in a depressing droop.

“What the...?”

She removes the picture from the broken piece easily, discarding it with a careless throw over her shoulder. Using the back of a hand, she straightens out the photograph, and brings it to whatever light was left, scrutinizing every detail all over again.

It looked like... *her*...

A sudden madness seizes her. The wish to hide it, to create a forbidden secret and never tell her mother about it was intensely strong. Instantly, a counter-feeling emerges, the maddening desire to do it harm. It would be so easy to destroy it, rip it to shreds and stamp it out of existence. Surely nobody would miss it, seeing as they were either dead, in hiding far away from the cities, or imprisoned within COVERS. Her hand moves to crush the photo. Muscles flex and veins bulge from underneath pale skin, but she cannot bring herself to complete the act. Her hands tremble the slightest bit, and she curses herself for forming such an attachment to a mere decorated piece of paper.

She meditates, eventually regulating herself to following the same decision she made the week before- only telling Ragyou if and only if she had specifically mentioned it. Ryuuko quickly navigates out of the home and hides the picture in a tree hollow, careful to bury it under layers of leaves to protect it from further water damage. After a moment of thought, she goes back inside the ruins and retrieves a picture frame in a much more intact condition than the picture's original container, and replaces the photograph inside, careful so as to not even wrinkle a corner in the process.

Ryuuko steps away, looking at the results of her work. It frightens her, churns in her stomach and twists it in the most unwelcome ways. Her breathing changes, becoming fast and shallow. Eyes dart within their sockets, narrow and shrunken in appearance. Suddenly, she turns away and looks back up at the celestial dome above, with its twinkling lights and distant planets. It made her think too much.

This place...

It was wrong. It was all wrong. Everything from the mere grass to the burnt husk of this ruin set off so many alarm bells in her mind. Things that were and things that could have been plagued her suddenly, and she lets out a mighty scream that sends hundreds of birds suddenly shooting into the darkened sky, pouring all her rage and frustrations into the shout. Everything in the world didn't add up, and she was getting tired of it all.

The fruit in her hand, long frozen at its bitten edges and forgotten, is let to fall from her fingers. Feet pad lightly on the grass away from the burnt mansion, then abruptly are cut off. Nothing but the resulting breeze from a sudden aerial departure remains- a memento of a ghost in transit- as the half-eaten fruit finally makes acquaintance with the ground.

They saw the stars.

It was quite hard not to notice them, in fact, for they were far away from the deadened land they left behind, abandoning it for the heavens above. Here, suspended on the razor's edge of the sky and outer space, nothing but the two of them existed. She soared higher and higher, leaving only a singular trail of light blue in her wake as she cruised past layers of atmosphere, perfectly content despite the freezing chill of the thin air.

It is quiet here.

The Earth is completely before them now, presented as it were like in the textbooks mother had shown and read to her as a child. A soft comfortingly blue glow covers its surface; an indescribable feeling of peace with the universe flows easily between the two of them.

They easily dance among the starry backdrop, the chimera's enthusiasm at finding her ability to survive in the cold vacuum of space clear as daylight. Like the passing of a shooting star, they streak across the empty void, exuberant and reveling in shared amazement. Far from the world, their problems seem infinitesimally small in comparison, and the fact that the planet itself would soon be devoured by the life fibers meant little to them. If such was the way of the universe to create such a wonderful backdrop in the first place, then surely a mere hunk of rock was a small price to pay.

The blonde nuzzles her forehead against Ryuuko's neck, and the latter makes a brief grunt of approval, dropping back to the borderline between the exosphere and thermosphere. The restitched god-being had surprised her mere minutes ago with her sudden appearance by continuing her streak of overly dramatic appearances - smashing through the ceiling, scooping her up from her workbench, and smashing back out through the reinforced cement roofing, for one. They cruise in the stellar void for what seemed like hours, reveling in the

simple beauty of the spacial backdrop. The emptiness of the universe makes her glad that this crazed ex-delinquent would be at her side permanently at the end of the world.

The chimera's chest hums as she starts to recite a lullaby of sorts that Ragyou had often sung to calm her whenever she had found herself saddened by the cruelty of the world or been at the receiving end of a bullying group's attentions (or so she thought). Its words are sad, but the inflection kind - as strangely peaceful as the chiming chorus of glockenspiels and windchimes.

"You're alone in the rain, been thinking of you... You can't stop your tears, and when you stay with me just like before, I want to know... do you love me?"

"Ryuuko..." Nui mouthed, clinging ever so tightly onto the halfling.

Would it be right to tell her her feelings? Would harboring such feelings be admitting weakness, make her one and the same to the filthy humans that lived below like animals? Surely it hasn't stopped her from toying with this girl before, back before she was chaos restitched into divinity, ensnared into their cause by being bound to a kamui. Nothing stopped the Grand Couturier, anyhow- she went and did whatever she damn well pleased, and nobody could stop her.

But still...

"Ryuuko, I..." said chimera cocks her head back and quirks a thin brow, and the blonde's throat constricts at the small gesture. "...We should get back. Mother will worry her head off," she continues instead. "We've been away for such a long time... Surely she would want me to finish my work, and you to return to her," her smile returns after a small pause. "And I'm sure she would be happy to see you after all! I mean, you're so scarce nowadays!"

Nui sees the demonic scowl that twists her lips for the briefest of moments before it too is wiped away. And just as abrupt as the grimace had departed, Ryuuko drops like a bunch of lead balloons, descending towards the earth fast enough to nearly crush organs - herself included.

Nui beholds the ex-delinquent, her stoic visage unchanged even as heat and flames surround them in reentry. The intense bluish white of the fire frames her wild and savage nature perfectly, complementing all too beautifully with the respective two colors of the outfit. They fall, letting gravity and thrust take their course. Clouds dreamily pass them on their way down; tracers of pallid white slip past them, the remnants of the vaporous material they so carelessly fell through as they descend. The white flames flaunting Junketsu's power eventually die down, leaving them with nothing but the company of each other's presence one more.

'Ange déchu de la croix,' she thinks. Believes.

Says, for Ryuuko turns her head towards her and tastes the foreign language experimentally on her tongue. It is clear that she doesn't like it's flowery tones, tripping over the syllables with the grace of a tap-dancing bull. She makes a face and tries again, managing to make the jumbled mess of words slightly less offensive to her ears.

“Arangederakara?”

Nui shakes her head and elects to snuggle closer instead of repeating herself, leaching off the other’s warmth and relishing the calm, steady thumping of her unnatural heart even as they were assailed by g-forces strong enough to instantly crush a normal human’s internal organs. They fell faster and faster, the ground rushing up to meet them, as if eager to welcome them home. And for the briefest of moments, Nui thought their situation akin to what happened when an immovable object met an unstoppable force.

Just before they are to become one with the earth - literally- , Ryuuko levels out, using the remainder of her momentum to speed off towards the direction of Honnouji. Seas rose as they passed, parallel waves born from the force that reached for the skies before succumbing to gravity. A visible ripple in the air itself and a thunderous clap tailed their arrival, the cacophony of a thousand shattering windows and buildings blown to matchsticks for kilometers around following the sonic boom soon after. The blonde squirms against her soul-sibling’s chest, clapping her hands in unrestrained glee.

“How beautiful!” she exclaims, watching shards of clear material spin in the air, rainbows gleaming off jagged edges for the thousandth of a second and casting colorful glows into the gloomy backdrop behind.

Cities streak past as dark blurs against a gloomy backdrop even as Ryuuko reduces her speed to match that of a commercial airliner. How tragic it was that this moment couldn’t have lasted longer, if not forever.

‘Never mind that,’ she corrects herself, ‘Forever is but a week away.’

She stood attentively in the center of the Kiryuuin manor courtyard, tolerating the devastating blows launched at her. Some were glancing shots that merely nicked at her sides, others were performed with deadly precision and a force enough to instantly shatter the entirety of a normal human’s ribcage. Ragyou chose to amuse herself today by testing her daughter. ‘Fighting’ her. Gauging the limits of her power as a newly-awakened chimera. For the elder, this was nothing more than play, a continuation of an experiment eighteen years overdue.

“Now, defend.”

Ryuuko is sent flying into the air, wind knocked out of her before she can process the command. Ragyou is fast- deadly fast. She is flitting in and out of the younger’s vision and managing to land crippling blows on the latter- all before she could properly draw her blades. All Ryuuko can do after knocking a thrusting arm away is parry or block her lightning-quick strikes, and even that has her pushed almost to the edge. Again and again, she falls, only managing to endure the onslaught thanks to the power the activated kamui feeds into her.

Fingers splay as she voluntarily lets go of her blades when Ragyou locks them against her own, shattering the earth underneath them. She throws a leg out, kicking with the force of a hundred men and sending all four of them far into the sky. She launches back into the air,

pushing off the ground and leaving spider-web impressions behind, and reclaims her weapons, discarding the snow white needle-shaped blades with a wrist flick.

There is a rush of wind beside her and she ducks, feeling claws graze past her hair even as she tries to put space between them. Ragyou follows her, easily outpacing her even without a kamui donned. Every time Ryuuko moves, Ragyou is already there, preparing a strike.

Without thinking, Ryuuko shouts and unintentionally issues forth fibers from her fingertips. Something connects with it, and she tugs as hard as she can, looping around the empty space to bide her time while it is brought to her. Ragyou falls into her trap, the summoned cloth-form COVERS fly in front of the taller woman, offering the younger a means of temporary protection from her wrath. Her deep red eyes widen the slightest bit in surprise at the sudden intervention, hands moving faster than her mind. White blades slice through the cloth with ease, but her quarry is long gone.

She turns, looking for her prey, but is oblivious to the growing shade behind her. Finally seeing the shadow spill atop hers below, she whips around, and is drop-kicked out of the sky with a single blow. Ryuuko's calf solidly cracks against Ragyou's crown, the noise sharp and clean even with the sloppy execution. The older chimera's figure makes a deep impression in the brickwork, and she gasps for air, pulling herself out of the hole.

There was a flash of gold and of black.

“Stop.”

Ryuuko immediately halted her movements, the black blade a few odd centimeters away from decapitating the woman and sending her head flying into the atmosphere. Heels softly clacked on fine marble as she removed herself from the impression and moved behind the girl, fingers sensually trailing the muscled outlines of the younger's figure. Ryuuko held her posture perfectly, body still poised in the half-lunge she favored when striking, Bakuzan still outstretched and gripped somewhat loosely in her hands. Ragyou sneered.

“Turn the blade towards yourself.”

Ryuuko obeyed, reversing her grip and letting the point graze her abdomen, just under the sternum. There was no fear on her face; only a hint of slight resignation decorated her features.

“And now,” she lowered her voice to a near-whisper, smiling in her daughter's ear. “Strike.”

Red spilled on white. Ragyou easily pulled the blade from its bloody sheath, pointing the freed end between the second daughter's breasts. Ryuuko leaned into the blade the slightest bit, letting it bite into her flesh once more, much to her mother's unrestrained glee.

“My darling daughter,” Ragyou sighed, reaching in the large gash from earlier, navigating upward until she found the brainwashed girl's core.

She felt the steady thumping of the thickly walled muscle, relaxed even in the face of possible death. To say that Ragyou thrived over this sick control over others was a clear

drastic understatement. Her hand retracted, taking with it the heart. The fibers glowed brighter than before and encompassed the majority of the surface, seamlessly interspersed with the tissue.

“Rei informs me that you have left Japan for a very short time after scouring the better part of it for some time. Care to inform me why?”

She decides to tell a very small lie- rather, something that is the truth and yet misconstrued so as to also represent a lie. There is no knowing what will happen to her should a complete falsehood be discovered, and she is unwilling in this stage to take that chance.

“My sleep... is haunted by visions. A gnawing feeling deep inside me, telling me that I should go outside borders more and more. That I am incomplete. That I should not rest until that which I am looking for is found.”

Ragyou is quiet for a minute, searching within herself for the answer. Nui had indeed reported Ryuuko’s strange behavior to her, as well as the abnormal reaction upon waking up. The data gleaned from the fixed tracker had told her as much- thousands of miles covered in a single day, and several hours where no movement at all was recorded. And then, it comes to her, and a small twitch of her lips upward is all that is needed to reassure the younger chimera that nothing was wrong at all.

“Oh, I see,” she continues, her sly grin growing more and more pronounced with every passing second, cupping Ryuuko’s face and bringing her body close against her daughter’s. Bakuzan clatters to the stone inlays with a metallic clatter, bouncing once off of the brickwork before settling down. “You are searching for kin. For completion.”

She nearly cackles in glee as her second daughter gives her nothing but confused stares. She lets a long-nailed hand toy with the strands of her dark locks, memories of Africa and her first days dating that fool of an ex-husband filling her head. Ryuuko was still a teenager, after all, and it was approximately right about her age that she had taken over the conglomerate from her own mother and executed daring missions on her own, wanting to take advantage of the full extent of the powers afforded to her by the life fiber. It was also when she herself had carelessly smashed down the barriers put up by her foolish ancestors - senile old *weaklings* that believed that the current state of the world would remain static, permanently unchanging despite the swelling tides that moved about it. A pity that her more useful second child hadn’t taken on more of her physical characteristics and had instead adopted Souichirou’s own.

She pauses, twirling the other’s pronounced scarlet bang around a finger, marveling at its vibrancy and feeling the life fibers easily glide past her smooth skin. How foolish she was for thinking that this marvelous creature could have so easily died. How utterly *distasteful* Souichirou was for his deceptions and attempts at hiding this miracle child. Just the thought of the man and the large impression he had physically on their second child was almost enough to more than raise the hairs at the back of her neck in anger.

‘Still...’ she thinks, ‘*There is always room for... improvement...*’

The Kiryuuin matriarch sneers, lulling the younger into a false sense of complacency with close physical contact. She finally lets go of the muscled organ and runs the same hand through dark hair, streaking steel blue with carmine. The heart easily retracts back into its opening like it had over a month prior and is swallowed up by a wave of skin that secures it back into place with naught but a comical '*pop*'.

"You crave the attentions and physical being of another. A partner in combat and in other worldly pursuits, even if you yourself had not realized it," she lets her front press against Ryuuko's back, her breath tickling the other's neck. "Do not worry. It is only natural, even if Junketsu is bestowed upon you, as with all the fine pleasures in the world. The need to search for a being quite like yourself - a perfect fusion of humanity and life fibers or not - and grow in power together. All that matters is if his tolerance towards the life fibers is higher than the average population. Or root out and destroy the most resistant members in the family, be it your own flesh and blood or... " she lets out a contemplative, if not inaudible, sigh. "...Your own sister. The will to continue to carry on the mission of the life fibers. It practically marks you as a true Kiryuuin - the apex of all humanity."

"I don't know. I want to... do things with her and her damn body..." Ryuuko admits grudgingly,, but quickly adds on her second wish to destroy her completely to prevent the wrong idea from being transmitted. "I want to torture her with her own knives... brainwash her own elites into doing it to her... and make her suffer for months on end."

"There's only one way to deal with it, then..."

Ragyou smiles against Ryuuko's bared skin. The small hesitation was not lost on her at all.

"Submit to your desires," the CEO whispers, brushing a knuckle against the back of Ryuuko's neck. "But," her voice turns ice cold, edged with unfeeling steel as her bone presses warningly against her flesh, "be sure that you don't indulge *too* much. I trust that you recall what should happen if you play too roughly with her, yes?"

Pain flares up at the site at the gesture and the vertical length from the base of her neck down to her tailbone suddenly feels paradoxically numb and tingly at the same time, but she figures that it was from the contact more than anything else. Ryuuko instinctively melts under her touch, her body curling against the woman's own. Ragyou continues to whisper in her ear, and she finds herself willingly speaking without being prompted to. She can't quite stop herself from talking, but what she could do through the treacherous haze that suddenly permeated her mind was alter her speech slightly, give only statements that were indeed correct, but also misconstrued viewpoints greatly.

A modified truth, of sorts.

Ragyou was right. It was easier to submit than to continue fighting even as her supports collapsed about her. It is hard to resist her will, but nitpicking her speech and finding the tiniest of loopholes sure made the process easier.

"And what would you do with Satsuki if you indeed met her, hm?"

"I want to kill her. I want to paint the walls with her blood."

Ragyou smirks.

“All in due time, my dear child, but again, do try to bring her back alive. Your... *sister*... will be an excellent source of power for what I have... planned for all of us.”

With that, she retrieves her blades and departs, leaving her daughter all alone. Ryuuko shakes herself from her induced stupor and picks Bakuzan up, only to be hit by another more powerful feeling.

“***Come,***” it merely says, and she is helpless to resist.

One foot moves forward, then another. An unknown magnetic force brings her back inside and into the maze of enormous hallways, where the ceilings are arched high and the corridors seem to stretch on forever in all directions. She navigates only by the mental tug that pulls at the very fibers within her, the painful throbbing exponentially increasing in intensity should she stray off the path and soothed more and more the closer she gets to its locus. Ryuuko notes as she seems to pass the same room for the sixth time with no small amount of interest that Ragyou had not bothered to do her usual life fiber check, and she grins the grin of a woman who had learned the secret to life.

“Is it better to be honest but thought dishonest or dishonest but thought honest in terms of relativity to one’s morals gained through experience?”

Her own voice ripples from within, coated in honey and soft-spoken as always.

Ryuuko snorted through her nose, a puff of white vaporizing in the air with the forced exhale from the lack of heat circulating throughout the building. What an idiotic question. Of course the more preferable option was to be thought trusted- that way, the option to backstab would be forever in their grasp.

Junketsu is pleased with the answer. It is obvious in how a sudden feeling of sick satisfaction that is not her own leaches into her being, how a ripple of electricity and fired synapses send a visible tingling sensation down her spine from the base of her neck. Soon, they arrive at their destination. A dark feeling of foreboding fills her, but she jiggles the doorknob anyway. The door is locked.

No matter. She raises a foot, prepared to kick the door in, but the white kamui stops her, tugging at their intertwined fibers at the base of her neck.

“*Wait,*” it commands, directing her to instead find two slim pieces of metal- one ridged and the other ramrod straight.

Both enter the jagged slit, and she navigates the crevices and tumblers easily, her muscles reflexively going through the motions without mental input. Before long, the simple lock pops open with a small ‘click’, and she is ushered inside by the god robe before she could understand. She did not know her fingers possessed such skill, and she marvels at them, admiring their roughened exterior like it’s the first time she sees them.

Where had she learned such a thing?

“*Kiryuuin*, ” the voice of the legion intones near-monotonously, and her head snaps up so fast to meet it that she could swear her neck nearly broke from the action. “*Come closer.*”

She obeys, letting the engraved wood shut behind her. The original life fiber looms ahead of her, and she suddenly feels so pitifully small- an insect flying in the face of the physical embodiment of a god.

“So. You have summoned life fibers for your own use. A fitting achievement for someone of your caliber and age, but not one achieved by what we bestowed upon you upon our last meeting.”

Summoning life fibers? She disregards this notion, and the callous dismissal is plain on her face. She thinks it impossible, a talent that only Ragyou and Nui possessed very much like how only her mother and Satsuki had the power to represent their power visually in blinding light.

“Surely you have felt it within yourself as I have,” it counters. *“They were still attached to my being when you pulled them from the skies to come to your aid.”*

Ryuuko bows her head, avoiding its ‘sight’ and trading its visage for her hand’s own. She tests her strength reflectively, feeling the heat of power rush through her very veins, where it scalds her tissue and feeds on her blood. Sinew and muscles move, grouped tissues knotted over flesh easily carrying out her actions.

She reaches out to the threaded being and concentrates, attempting to synchronize her frequency with the individual’s own. The tendrils hanging limply in the air suddenly spring to life, slithering along the ground to her like snakes. The connection is poor and tenuous at best, and it shows. Their progress is jittery and halting, but the more she impresses her will on them, the more they obey her. Soon, they form into a lump. Any subsequent attempts at giving it a more definite shape is foiled, however, by her own lack of mental stamina more than anything. Still, the fibrous god-figure makes a noise of approval and continues its speech.

“Your progenitor is dreadfully... incompetent... at disseminating our task, being so focused on her machinations rather than anything else. The resisting force grows yet more prepared in their final strike with each passing day. She acknowledges this to some extent, but is overly arrogant in her power to stop this. She risks the success of her own mission by her own incompetence.”

Its tone turns derisive, mocking even.

*“She thinks herself a **god** and places herself above our cause, believing her own delusions of compliance while seeking to solidify her own position of power- even keeping you in the dark about your own abilities, one of which you had the... pleasure... of discovering today. There is but one solution to our problem.”*

One fibrous band curls around her ankle, and she resists the strong urge to stumble back. It slithers up her leg, winding itself around the limb along its journey, and rests on a hip, where it stretches up to meet and wrap around her wrist- a python ensnaring a branch. The amount

of nervousness she feels around the very being that had brought her life is disgusting. It threads between her digits, where it lays like an obedient beast, ready to rise at its master's call. It is warm and comforting, and the pulse of life it possesses resonates with her own. It nestles deeper against her skin, as if seeking to draw from her well of life.

"You, the heir, must kill the spare. Devour her whole and take what is rightfully yours- the power she holds so dear and hides from you."

The thought is entirely foreign to her. Surely it was not suggesting what she thought it was? She still loved her mother even though her personality had soured as of late, and admitted to having thoughts about disobeying her on small things, but to even entertain the idea of ***murder?*** Outrageous, and unquestionably so. She offers the suggestion of a scapegoat in her mother's stead.

"Satsuki?"

It finds the notion hilarious.

"Haven't you questioned why Satsuki was able to find those able to tolerate the life fibers even moreso than the average human being? Why they were able to don clothing made up of a larger percentage of life fibers and resist being devoured?"

Of course. The memories of her *dear* older sister's brutal training regimes were burned in her head. She was forced to watch them, after all. Their screams were still etched in her memory, but she ignored them- they were the enemy, after all, and it wouldn't do her any good to suddenly show mercy to those who wouldn't hesitate to have her head on a plate.

"She trained them. Had sticks up their asses from when she first coerced them into being in her little group to the time when they tried to kill mother."

"Mmm... Yes, and no. Training and disciplining them in the use of clothing imbued with a higher concentration of life fibers from their pre-pubescent stage increased their tolerance to their power while at the same time boosting their resistance to being consumed by that which they wear... ..But the reason primarily lies not in their mental fortitude."

Your line, as well as those that derived from the Kiryuuins and its subsequent variations are special. It is resonant and for the most part symbiotic with the introduction of our being, where most of humanity fail to achieve due to... complications, sadly. This includes the innate urge to seek out others that contain this amenability to our kind, to reproduce with them and produce more humans that are... perfect for integration. Or to subjugate them and bring them into their power for the sole purpose of consolidation."

"But... that means...?"

"No. Chimerization is an incredibly difficult concept to generate, with the mechanisms involving gene expression practically nonexistent in the general population. The recessive mutation within the Kiryuuin line involves a loss-of-function allele which happened to be replicated and passed down. The repressor mechanisms preventing this chain of events from

happening was removed, allowing successful transcription of the gene that makes your kind more... amenable to mine."

Its tendrils swished like the long tail of a beast lying in wait, the movements gracious and hypnotizing in nature.

"Haven't you given thought as to why clothing purely made of life fibers easily bends to your will, to why their very beings fly to you upon your enemies' defeat?"

She pauses, staring. She hadn't.

"You, Kiryuuin Ryuuko, have the ability to command them. Not just the ones within yourself, but everything around you. The ability is... unrefined, at best and sadly underdeveloped... but, such a hinderance can be overcome and the talent prevalent with practice. You call them to you, and command them to strengthen your very being, heal you by letting themselves be dissolved and consumed by your own fibers.

Now then... I trust you know how to solve this problem of ours?"

Ryuuko wasn't stupid. She knew that by offering this information to her, the primordial life fiber was attempting to curry favor within her, to incite violence between the Kiryuuin line purely for its own benefit. Thanks to the philosophied rule of two regarding human-life fiber chimeras, both Ragyou and herself couldn't be in the same seat of power without any conflict sparking between them. Simply put, it wanted to replace Ragyou with her, seeking someone younger to carry out its will.

Double ouroboros. One cycle of destruction and rebirth feeding into another, and being fed in turn by its geminal cycle as well. Two snakes eating the other's tail. Double zero. Everything anyone or anything does is pointless and is subjected to being forgotten in the sands of time eventually. Infinity. Everything is looped in one perfect cycle.

There wasn't any choice in the matter. Either she would obey as well, or be subjected to her own destruction. So, as one would do when they were trapped in a corner with a beast breathing down their back, she agreed.

But there was one crucial difference that separated her from Ragyou or any mindless worm that sucked the teat of the fibers' power- it didn't say when or how to execute Ragyou's demise, and in that, she was free to experiment as she pleased.

"I will see to its completion. Her blood will water the furrowed ground and-"

Her false show of bravado is shattered as a stab of something hits her, and she feels incredibly stupid for suggesting such a thing. She couldn't even directly defeat her own mother in training combat, instead having to resort to guerrilla attacks like a weakling. Like *Satsuki*. How would she even...?

"The one that is your equal and opposite will be the key. Liberate. Not subjugate," it commands, and then it is quiet and speaks no more, the roaring murmur of voices now directed at each other rather than her person.

Subjugate...

Ryuuko flexes her fingers experimentally, suddenly hypersensitive of the fibers interspersed within her tissues. The tendril that had been resting on the limb slithers away, choosing to lie at her feet instead. She feels the life fiber mass observing her languidly, but she cares not. Her attention is called elsewhere.

What if she...?

She tries to mimic Nui, tries to force them to the surface, but it is all for naught. Her attempts at repeating the very same technique she used on the COVERS earlier end the same way. Her endeavors to create marionette threads using her own fibers and materializing them from thin air have as much resounding success.

So she tries to manipulate her blade instead, turning it over in her palms. It hums at her touch, the very fibers synchronizing with hers even though they were long-dead and crystallized into its current shape. It easily responds to her will, elongating and slipping into its decapitory form. She is satisfied, but that form is mere child's play. A fang catches on a lip, and she cocks her head. What if she just...

With more effort, she reshapes it into a glaive, and then a one-ended scythe. By now, sweat is visibly dripping from her forehead and sliding from her face in rivulets of crystal clear liquid. She attempts the same with Bakuzan, and is pleased to find that it resonates with her- or at least, the black part of the blade does- but it does not quite respond as well. Its transformation is limited given her extreme inexperience with bending other life fibers to her will, but it hums as it is temporarily lengthened. Its point becomes sheerer and slimmer like a scalpel, a means to write the very fates of those it meets with the red ink provided by the beings it touches. A pen fit to carve into flesh and rework its form.

And then it is over. She removes her hand, and the black blade trembles as it snaps back into the shape it was birthed in. Satisfied, she puts both blades away. Maybe later, she would play with them more. But for now...

She departs swiftly, making sure that the doors are locked upon her exit. Just to be sure, she tests the doorknob, jiggling it the slightest bit to ensure its status, fleeing upon the faintest sound of feet padding down the hall in a whirlwind of white.

She escapes into an unused alcove. Only the trailing hem of her hakama would have given her away, but it too is whisked into the protective cover of the dark interior. An abundant resource given the lack of electricity due to nonfunctional power plants, and her closest ally, the shadows had been more than helpful in allowing her to hear the various comings and going-ons of the area.

The kamui was more than halfway complete. She was running out of time, to put it simply.

She pushes such thoughts out of her mind, focusing instead on her new-found talents. A wicked grin soon is etched on her face, lips stretching until they are nothing more than faint pink lines that almost seem to touch their owner's eyes. If she could bend the will of the life fibers to her own and Satsuki could do the same but with humans, would that mean...?

A bark of laughter escapes her.

The idea nearly makes her knees tremble with excitement, but she keeps the feeling inside her, letting the rush of energy steel her resolve for her next task. She wasn't stupid by any means- academia wasn't her forte (as dear mother had found out during a positively disastrous event several years ago), but her ability to read others exceeded a great percentage of the general human population. Strategy, however, would be an issue.

Perhaps watching and waiting would be the best course of action for the moment while she set her pieces up, meticulously guiding them and ensuring that they didn't yet cross paths unless necessary. And then when the time came, she would tip the dominos and let them fall one on top of the other, setting off an irreversible chain of events.

But then again, becoming more of a neutral party and hanging back would not be such a terrible idea either.

That is indeed what dear little Satsuki did, was it not? Play others against each other while she waited in the wings, and then swooped in for an easy kill as soon as everyone was tired and weak from fighting. Refined cowardice at best, but unsurprisingly efficient.

Like a cat, she springs to a tall window nestled well over above ground with all the grace and refined finesse associated therein. Pausing only to take one last look at the locked doors, she slips out through the opening, melding into the darkness.

Time to pay big sister another visit.

The intel room is quiet. Nothing but the electric hum of servers fill the air, save for the sound of nails on keyboards, the occasional steamy wisps eliciting from a bone-colored teacup, and the quiet breathing of a dozen individuals.

“Lady Satsuki...”

She raises a hand, effectively cutting whatever apologies her elites were going to make on their behalf for their perceived failures on part of better guarding her. The words die in their throat, and their curious eyes plus several others look upon her expectantly.

“It was a poor decision on my part to choose to hastily engage her in the state I was in. However, it was an opportunity to properly examine the extent of brainwashing imposed upon her and formulate a counter-offensive to that.”

“And determine why you are the object of her fascinations?”

She takes a sip from the decorated cup, nodding the slightest bit at both Houka and Soroi as the latter refills the vessel with fresh tea.

“Indeed. She had many a chance to kill me but chose to forgo all of them, choosing instead to toy with me and become familiar with her attacking style. In fact,” she continues, gesturing to the black kamui hanging loosely upon her frame for emphasis, “Senketsu informs me that she

had willingly prevented me from being devoured by COVERS- and thus saved me from being prematurely returned to Ragyou.”

She ponders thoughtfully for a moment, looking pensively at the ceramic china before her.

“We can reasonably deduce that she maintains a form of free will, if not one that is heavily regulated. The question I now ask is ‘if Ryuuko was able to resist such a temptation, what would have led her to submitting to Junketsu in the first place?’”

Silence greets her.

“Simple,” she explains, turning slightly toward her beloved elites and the not-quite-so nudists. “Mother has simply played an elaborate mind game on Matoi. She specialized in psychology shortly before devoting her attentions and the vast Kiryuuin wealth towards the life fibers’ goals.

What most likely happened is an extreme version of mental reconditioning in that it was brought upon by a chain of events, perhaps. It wouldn’t surprise me if Matoi had caved in so easily. She always was a fiend in managing to bend others to her will, even without her mental refitting ability.

While Junketsu’s will has never been fully imposed on me, I do have knowledge of how it works. Psychological torment. Images of those you care about lying dead around you. Visions of catastrophic failure on part of the wearer’s lack of power stemming from refusing the kamui. Excruciating pain. And eventually, had you resisted it for far too long, madness and learned helplessness. But on the other end, an oasis. A simple stick and carrot trick. The decree of ‘obey, or suffer’. A reward of excess dopamine production upon bowing to the kamui’s whims. The life fibers have knowledge of every psychological and physiological backdoor to humans, seeing as our species’ evolution was guided by them.

Famine. Sleep Deprivation. Starve the beast and keep it weak, and you can control it. Deprive it of sleep, and you can beat it into submission without fear of it fighting back. My objective is simple- break the loop, and weaken the hold. The effectiveness of such an execution is wholly dependent on whether they are synchronized or not at the time of meeting.”

“My lady, you aren’t thinking of drawing Matoi here by using yourself as a target, are you?”

One of her secretive grins- all lips, no teeth- wormed its way on her face, and she and breathed in the tea’s fragrant vapors. Rather than responding, she merely tipping her face down and let the warmth of the liquid pass through her.

It was snowing.

That fact in an of itself was rare for the time of year and even more unusual for the location she had elected as the best candidate for summoning the troublesome imp of a sibling. She is neatly dressed in a dark double breasted coat snugly fitting over the kamui and her standard black boots for the weather, but the cold still bites at the bare flesh left uncovered by the clothing of choice.

She knew she was being watched. She pretends not to know it and continues setting up, pouring water into a simple tin and laying out the edibles before her. She straightens up, letting the slight breeze toy with long ebony locks, and boldly voices her question to the waiting void.

“Aren’t you tired of hiding in the shadows, Ryuuko?”

There was the slightest shift in the air, and the sharpened end of her formerly owned blade was found resting atop the hollow of her throat, its bearer’s body suddenly pressed against her own from behind in a small whirlwind of pure white snowflakes.

“Matoi,” she spoke calmly, focusing her eyes ahead of her and keeping her body slackened in an attempt to assuage the other’s hostility.

Ryuuko didn’t answer, but the elder felt the brainwashed girl analyzing her, stalking around her like some sort of demented predator. She felt her move about in a tight circle around her, shaking her down, turning out her pockets and stripping her naked- all without having so much as twitch a muscle. So she had come after all, if in her overridden form rather than the one she honestly would have preferred a thousand times over. A slight problem in the scope of the present, but not too much of a hinderance for future plans- or so she determined after nothing more came out of the threat.

She felt the brush of the horns adorning the shorter girl’s head as the latter’s body rubbed against hers in abrupt passing, the tips scraping across her skin and easily drawing lines of red that itched slightly soon after. Ryuuko slithered under her sister’s arm, letting her hair slide past the appendage before straightening up in front of her, facing her nose-to-nose. She steps forward, intimately invading her space and making a stealthy escape all but impossible. Satsuki is quiet, electing to focus on the spot between the girl’s brows rather than looking at her directly in the eyes. In a flash, she is pinned against a wall, her former blade having migrated from her throat to hover over a lung.

“What game do you think you’re trying to play?” a sibilant hiss snakes into her ears. There is an unkind twinkle in her eye, and her expression jovially malicious. The blade pressed further against her flesh, a constant reminder of the fine line of danger she found herself constantly toeing.

Satsuki keeps silent, easily forcing herself to remain calm despite the very real and very likely possibility of her sister fulfilling her threat. Ryuuko twirls the wakizashi in her hand, a tongue moving along its flat and letting its sharpened end almost kiss its previous owner’s lips.

“Not going to say anything? That’s so *unlike* you, Kiryuuin Satsuki, to not seize this opportunity to make those damned grand speeches your ilk so likes to make.”

She hums, bringing a hand to her chin in mock-thought.

“If you’re not going to use your tongue at all, perhaps I can help you by removing it completely.”

A swift knee smash to a trench-coat covered abdomen almost makes her falter, almost makes her part her lips and let the blade slip between two rows of perfectly maintained teeth and part the flesh from the rest of her body. Ryuuko's voice takes on a more aggressive edge, distorted by the effect of wearing an activated god robe.

"Say 'ah', bitch."

The kick comes again. Satsuki does nothing to evade it, absorbing the punishing blow in the same manner as she had withstood many of the same strikes from Ragyou while growing up. It does nothing to escalate a situation into combative territory

"I said, 'ah,' bitch!"

Ryuuko becomes more agitated at her lack of response more than anything else and her hair somehow manages to flare up in her enraged display.

"Fancy yourself an eagle, do you? Won't surprise me if this eagle flew too close to the sun and burnt her wings off. Or flew too far from its nest and got snatched up by the bigger birds of the skies."

She hums, the vibrations low and throaty and oddly resonant within her body. With a sudden wicked thought, she snaps her fingers. A shaggy-haired head is thrown back and thin lips are pulled back into a menacing grin. Ivory enamel tapered into small daggers unveil themselves in an act meant to strike fear into she who stands before her.

"I know! I'll carve you into a blood eagle. How about that, sis? You'll finally get your wings back!"

"Ryuuko."

A head tipped mockingly.

"*Ryuuko?*" she mimicked, rolling the 'r' and slurring the 'u' in the typical delinquent drawl of hers. "I'm sorry, Ryuuko isn't here right now. Would you like to leave a message instead? I'm sure Junketsu would be happy to take it."

Satsuki's eyebrows furrow.

"I do not want to talk to Junketsu. I wish to speak to the fool of a girl that is swathed in the kamui."

Ryuuko's vocals split the stillness of the air with a burst of guttural noises sure to send involuntary *shivers* down the others spine. She laughs, wheezy and hoarse from lack of water, shoulders burdened with Junketsu's glory shaking and seizing in spastic fits.

"What a shame. Junketsu tells me that it has much to say about *you*, Kiryuuin Satsuki."

"Foolishness. Absolute foolishness."

“You don’t get it, do you? Are you *really* that dense after all this time? **We** are Junketsu—two perfect beings in one magnificent union. Surely it is not hard to understand.” A pause, and then a quiet snigger. “Oh, my apologies. I forget that you’re stuck with that lousy dishrag that calls itself a kamui and a farce that you declare a synchronization. How positively *tragic*.”

She rocks on her heels, nonchalantly shooting off a twisted kid-sister smile that is easily mistaken for an apologetic one.

“Now then... down to business. **Why** did you come here and specifically signal me, huh, sis? Answer that.”

The tinkling of Bakuzan Gako as it clatters to the ground fills the space between. The elder deftly kicks it away from her, slackening her body in calculated risk. Sharp sapphire eyes retain the gaze of blood-ruby ones.

“I came to offer you a truce between us,” Satsuki replies easily, drawing upon the numerous drops of resolve left in the great well within and her previous dealings with... less than *savory* individuals.

“A truce,” Ryuuko mulls, suspicion laced in her words and rippling within every fiber in her being. The kamui roars its dissent, something that only its wearer has the displeasure of hearing and feeling echo within their interlinked bodies. It is all too eager to rend the flesh standing before it and devour it whole.

The elder Kiryuuin waits patiently for her response and does nothing. To interject would otherwise undermine any trust placed within the tenuous silence between them. Ryuuko's blood-red eyes dark back and forth, indecisive. She remembers the dream with Nui suddenly in perfect detail, with all sensations of agonizing pain and terrified thoughts entailed. She squeezes her eyes shut, forcing it out of her mind.

“Terms.”

Satsuki’s eyebrow lifts the slightest bit. She doesn’t elucidate, however, and it frustrates the younger even more at the elder’s sudden need to be more enigmatic.

“**Terms**,” she hisses. “I won’t agree to shit unless you explain yourself pretty damn fast.”

“Simple. There are to be no hostilities between us— you and my respective party, to clarify—for four days.”

“And in return?”

“Nothing,” she lies, gesturing to the thermos of hot soup and the covered plate of croquettes.

“Screw that,” Ryuuko snarls back. “I know you, Satsuki. You want me to come back with you, arm in arm, singing the praises of the humanity and expecting me to turn on everything I’ve ever—”

“I don’t understand what is difficult about this proposal,” Satsuki interrupts, carefully navigating around the younger’s unfathomably deep well of anger. “My allies, nor myself, will attack you upon sight should we encounter you. You can continue to ravage the remainder of humanity, with the only stipulation being that you cannot attack my elites, myself, or Nudist Beach operatives. However, should any of them initiate combat, you are free to defend yourself without repercussions. These,” she continues, gesturing towards the edibles, “are merely extra portions cooked by Mrs. Mankanshoku and were given to me for my extended trip outside.”

“Bullshit. You were *waiting* for me. You knew I was going to come back here. So you can save your crap about your flunkies caring about me and shove it right up your-.”

“I wasn’t going to make a speech on their generosity, nor was I going to appeal to your emotions. You have shown that to be a useless endeavor, so I propose this question to you- ‘Why would I, Kiryuuin Satsuki, be so inefficient as to repeatedly try a strategic tactic that has failed multiple times and is completely known by the enemy?’”

One minute passes in absolute silence. Then two. Then three, four, and five.

“Fine,” she growls out, after almost ten additional minutes of deliberation. “But first...”

Her signature red sword is drawn in a flash, the stolen black Bakuzan twin casually held in the other. Satsuki takes this as a cue to shimmy out from where Ryuuko had trapped her between a wall and her body and retrieves her own, knees bending in preparation to attack.

“Come play with us, sis. Come play~...”

They fly in the air at the same time, their swords singing as both warriors type out the notes to the song only both of them know with each clash. Ryuuko hits much harder than their last encounter, and it shows then their weapons visibly shiver with each hit, the blades almost breaking with the powerful strikes each one deals.

Ryuuko’s learned new tricks, Satsuki belatedly realizes, barely managing to parry a sword swipe meant for crippling a leg. There is a shine that encompasses the white god robe, and she recognizes it as the manifestation of the Kiryuuin charisma. For the first time in her life, it blinds her, managing to do what even Ragyou could not- make her squeeze her eyes shut from the focused intensity.

Satsuki retreats, taking shelter in an opening in the environment for the briefest of moments before quickly moving to another. And so, Satsuki learns. She attacks from the shadows, taking advantage of their shelter before rapidly moving to another. Ryuuko fights in dazzling bright light, freely offering her body as a conduit to Junketsu’s power and letting the kamui control her movements- and it shows in the way the god robe’s blue outlines glow brightly as well. Satsuki thus maps out the environment around them, mentally burning the images and locations of obstacles around her so as to fight even when completely blinded- a new talent that comes quite easily to someone of her caliber, even as they rapidly cross the length of the area and back, constantly changing location.

She is a whirlwind of blades and battlecries, and Ryuuko scales with her, gradually increasing the difficulty until they are both blurs clad in their respective swapped color schemes. Now that Satsuki is comfortable in handling Senketsu, the brainwashed girl ups her attacks as well, leaving after images that confuse and frustrate her older sister.

In a sense, Ryuuko is manipulating Satsuki in very much the same way that she had with her back when they were student and President, respectively. They lock wills and blades, subtly training the other to become more efficient, more capable as warriors on their own merits. Everything Ryuuko had did up to this point was for her own amusement, but now that she is burdened with the task of removing a troublesome nuisance of a mother, she pours herself more and more into the engagement. Blood pounds in her ears. Her heart and lungs scream with exertion. But endorphins overrule any protests her physical form makes. Neurotransmitters flood her nervous system, making physically engaging Satsuki desirable- a pleasurable event, even.

Ryuuko roars, sliding down an embankment at blindingly fast speeds. The long-haired woman looks up and moves Bakuzan Gako just in time before the sword runs through her. Their respective weapons clash, sparks flying at the contact. Satsuki locks her blade in a defensive position as the sudden ferocity nearly causes it to fly out of her hands. Her arm is twitching, and she knows that she can't hold her off forever with just a short sword. She has to end this stalemate- fast.

She moves a leg, noting with satisfaction that Ryuuko's attention is instantly diverted to it, also moving a leg to impede her path. Object in reach, her palm snaps up, and successfully dislodges the red scissor sword from her sister's grip. Ryuuko squawks in astonishment as her weapon is suddenly stolen from her and is even surprised more so when it is pointed at her throat, the tip just barely scraping her jugular vein. Her head snaps back, evading the small wrist flick on Satsuki's end that would have easily gouged her flesh, ducks, and rushes forward.

Their collision easily shakes the ground below despite their position relatively high up. When the smoke clears, they find themselves in the center of a massive crater, their respective Bakuzan and scissor sword blades non-fatally embedded in each other's flesh, mere millimeters away from a vital organ of choice. For Ryuuko, a lung- ostensibly to cause the most psychological distress by letting her victim drown in their own blood. For Satsuki, the heart- the neatest and most efficient way to kill any person. Neither of them move. Understanding flits between the two, and it is silently agreed that there is nothing either can do without incurring the risk of one or both of them dying.

A draw, then. Ryuuko's eyes beam with pride.

They lower their weapons at the same time, never losing eye contact. For a while, all is quiet and peaceful. Snowflakes begin to coat the stilled duo, the white crystals nestling deep within dark strands of hair. A minute passes, and then another. The younger sibling turns briskly on a heel, bloodied and even visibly damaged, intending to depart as the kamui changes back into its sailor fuku form. But a sudden voice stops her in her tracks. She hates how much of an effect it has on her, and silently vows to one day physically rip that tongue from that accursed mouth- personally.

“Junketsu.”

Surprised, she turns, her arm shooting out without thought and effortlessly snatching up the handle of the blood-red blade. She looks at it, face melting into an ugly mixture of disgust and hate. Red eyes narrow, irises thinning and almost turning slit-like. Something twitches at the back of her mind, something screaming at her at how familiar the notion was and how it was related to the burnt wreck of a city she had fled to after the incident involving that damned piece of red cloth. Synapses fire rapidly upon contact, the memory of a similar event almost swimming to the surface of her thoughts before being violently suppressed by both kamui and wearer. Ryuuko turns her shock into vitriol, the enraged words dripping easily from between sharp teeth in coarse, growled tones. The inflection is not entirely that of a question, but of a frustrated series of words resembling those one would say upon discovering a not totally unpleasant surprise.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Satsuki doesn't bother to answer her question, instead returning to where they first met that day.

“Come,” she says, just as her feet leave the ground.

Ryuuko grudgingly follows, if not without considerable reservations. When she soars to her destination, she finds the other atop the surface, swathed once more in her trench coat and sitting cross-legged. Her calm eyes meet Ryuuko's red ones, noting how they ebb and swell as their owner tries to determine the elder's intent.

“Come,” she says once more.

“I'm not your damned dog, Satsuki. I'll sit when and where I damn well please.”

Satsuki merely stares, silently indicating a place for the other to sit and eat with a mere flick of her eyes. Their calm and unnaturally placid appearance easily projects her confidence, as if she realizes an advantage still unknown to the other party.

“Oh, I see,” Ryuuko scoffed, not moving from where she stood. “You've come up with a new way to poison me. Going to kill me because mother favors me? That's low even for you, Kiryuuin Satsuki.”

“I have done no such thing,” she replies truthfully, keeping her tone level to avoid another confrontation.

To emphasize her point, Satsuki takes a somehow still-steaming croquette from the pile, calmly devouring it with the air of grace that constantly hung about her. Ryuuko looked at the remaining fried foodstuffs suspiciously, but took it with the given pair of chopsticks, gingerly chewing on the breaded ingredients as if it were made of unprepared fugu. Staring in approval, the former President slowly unscrews the lid of the accompanying thermos and takes a long drink from it, proving that it too was not laced with any toxins or drugs of any kind.

When the metal container is offered to her, Ryuuko merely sticks her tongue in it and laps up the smallest amount of liquid possible to satisfy the ex-dictator- just enough to coat her tongue without the rich broth touching anything else. Satsuki doesn't say anything and merely gets up, retrieving her smaller Bakuzan half and respectfully moving away from Ryuuko's own, conscious of the fact that straying too close will be interpreted as an intent to fight once more. The life fiber human watches her carefully, intently focusing her attentions on every micro expression and the slightest hints of movement the other makes. Ryuuko stays in the cold long after the elder leaves, staring at her retreating form even when it becomes less than a black dot in a sea of white and disappears.

Come the morning, the thermos was discovered licked clean and the proffered food entirely gone, with a pair of slender utensils neatly bisecting the empty plate. With a knowing upward twitch of pale, thin lips, she carries the used supplies away, leaving fresh replacements in its wake. She feels eyes upon her, but she knows its owner and calmly resumes her task, a deed she once considered far beneath her and fitting of only servants.

"A four day truce."

She takes a sip of tea in response and subtly bows her head, all but confirming his suspicions.

"How do we know if she even intends to keep it?"

"Enough with your impertinent questioning, Inumuta," Gamagoori rumbles from where he is seated, head bushing against the unfortunately low ceiling.

Satsuki quietly smiles as Houka fires a snarky retort back, deriving mild pleasure from the uncanny sense of familiarity the people around her give just by devolving into petty arguments. But now was not the time, and the mere sound of her teacup resting on its accompanying saucer is enough for the duo to stop their short squabble and pay attention.

"We *don't*. And that is how we know she won't violate it.

This game of chess Matoi and I are playing... it is nothing more than a farce. I can control her movements with actions through using the same psychological techniques as Ragyou employs, and she can do the same in return, albeit in a less linear fashion, given her erratic behavior. In the end, however, Ragyou and Junketsu have considerable sway in her decisions. That is why I must wean her from them, to break their hold and induce an instinctive need to separate.

The peace treaty is based on mutual gain. Ryuuko receives personal experience in fighting me, and I get to counter her behavior and learn the best ways to further widen the rift between her and those keeping her captive. We know Ragyou has been starving her. Whether or not this is going towards threatening Ryuuko's life so that her life fibers are more active remains to be seen. Feeding her is merely the catalyst to furthering whatever resentment she may hold towards Ragyou."

She walks to the set of windows overlooking the deck. The morning sun frames her form perfectly, casting long shadows that dwarf all that stand in it.

“She has revealed to me that she and Junketsu are perfectly one- if only when synchronized, in her case. The latter part I discovered only through examining her behaviors. The way she displays her recent preference in being called by the kamui’s name is an obvious indicator of this. Therefore, I speculate that she can remain in her overridden form for days on end due to her submission to its will. Seeing as her prowess with Senketsu allowed her to easily fight using only blood initially drawn upon transformation into the most harmonious level of synchronization, this idea is not too far-fetched. Additionally, I’ve noted that while wearing Junketsu in its deactivated form, she retains a high degree of autonomy- surprising given the thorough extent of her brainwashing. Admittedly, I’ve only once caught her talking to it while it was in that state after I left her today, and from her according reactions soon after, it appears that they can communicate internally.”

“So the kamui controls her directly, then. Not Ragyou.”

“Precisely.”

Satsuki raises her head to meet the sun’s blindingly bright rays. The clock overhead informs her it is half past eleven, over four hours since she had replaced the supplies, and that she should execute the next drop within an hour. Her elites were excellent at deduction as always- unsurprising, given that they were specially trained by her to far exceed the requirements necessary for battle with Ragyou.

“Why Ryuuko remains autonomous in that she has a form of will separate from Junketsu remains to be seen. However, the failure in suppressing this was Ragyou’s mistake. Her arrogance had led her to believe that humans are weak and that they will only follow the path of pleasure and avoid that of pain and loss- something that Matoi and Mankanshoku had proven wrong through their foolish behavior during that fight club episode. No doubt that such a crude gesture in stitching Matoi to the kamui would have completely ensured her victory and caused the destruction of the world- had Matoi actually followed through and turned me over.”

A heel firmly snaps down as she ascends the platform, her magnificence intensified with the mere gesture.

“But I am Kiryuuin Satsuki. When I speak, the world will follow. My will can bend the world’s own to me. Bringing a wayward student back in line is of no issue. If I can raise armies and force Ragyou’s plan to a standstill, recapturing Matoi and manipulating her to serve our purposes as we have done during Honnouji while leaving her free will intact should be a trivial matter.”

She turns briskly, regarding her fellows with an unreadable expression.

“That is our path to victory.”

Nui giving Ryuuko a mortal wound to prove [Ryuuko's] inhumanity after Satsuki detonated the stadium to give everyone a chance to escape was in one of the drama CDs. Nui looking like Ryuuko is based on her early concept art/designs. Junketsu's "human" form is based on Ryuuko's mental state. Thus, only she can see it as something other than a thread-faced mannequin. Obviously, when she is 'waking up' during the 'marriage', she is less influenced by Junketsu.

"Hakuma" comes from 『白魔』, which means "white devil". Nui's quote translates to "Fallen angel of the cross". The Chinese header contains snippets from Sun Tzu's "The Art of War"- chapters 7 and 13, respectively.

Razormind

Chapter Summary

TL;DR: Ryuuko Kiryuuin-Matoi gets a belated birthday present from her big sis. It's another life crisis.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Complicated, lines outdated, what you paid is what you become.

...

Indication the time had come, you will become, you were born to be-"

~ 'Born to Be', **Rave la Kill**

It was a mistake to come here.

Stranded in the middle of the ocean, without safe harbor, food, or fuel, they had become desperate. And so they had made their way to this ravaged land despite the clear warnings, where they had hoped to find respite and supplies- things that were not possible to easily obtain given the nature of the ocean. It was their mistake to wash upon these shores, but perhaps it was not entirely of their own volition. It was a bigger mistake to have lit flares in hopes of signaling survivors- desperate times bred desperate measures, after all. But their biggest mistake was waiting too long in one spot, becoming paranoid beyond measure and firing upon the first moving object that crossed their path with their assault rifles.

Unfortunately for them, that object in question was the ex-delinquent, who had thought the intrusion into her territory curious and wanted to investigate further. The extra ventilation their chattering guns made in her kamui wasn't received too happily, however.

It was Bakuzan that was raised against the pitiful mass of swine before her, rather than the red sword of vengeance. The sword crafted and engineered for justice, brought down to purging the proclaimed filth of the planet. Ironic.

She stands towards the side, cocking her head to the side at the medley of men and women in various states of agony, all either unconscious or groaning in pain. Despite their superior training, their martial arts and marksmanship skills had been no match for the power of the life fibers. Ryuuko does not notice the growing shadow behind her, only whipping her head as the sound of crunching glass underfoot alerts her to his presence. But it is too late. Her heavy cloak is pushed aside and a sharpened bayonet is plunged through her back, easily slicing through the heart and arteries in its ragged sawing path toward destruction. The

restitched hybrid does not make a sound, save for a surprised sudden exhale of breath, as the sharpened metal sticks out through her torso, wet with her blood. Stunned, she can only look down, red spilling from her lips and dripping down her chin.

Triumphantly, her assailant rips it out and slides it across her slender neck, leaving a deep, ugly gash that easily bites into bone. He smirks. Checkmate.

"Gotcha, bitch,"

And for good measure, he stabs her through the back once again and forces it to slide along the bone, the knife slipping between ribs and finding its home in a lung. Lt. Helmich watches as she convulses upon impact, struggling for breath as liquid fills her collapsing organ. She uselessly scrabbles at the pointed end where it protrudes through her chest, anxiously fighting for breath and life. But it is a battle she soon loses.

Wordlessly, she crumples to her knees, keeling over dramatically as red spills onto the grey concrete below.

Lieutenant Thorne Helmich slowly turns, not all too proud of what he had done, but feels righteously justified in his actions nonetheless. The blood on his hands is bright and full of life, and he clenches them, suddenly sick to his stomach. Knees buckle as the urge to vomit starts to overwhelm his senses, but he forcefully pushes it aside- a developed suppressant birthed from the necessity of ambivalence to war so many years ago. The soldier grinds his heels into the pavement and begins to make his way to the rest of the supplies they brought with them, intent on building a permanent shelter to weather out this storm.

But then, he hears something completely unexpected.

"Ha... ha... ha ha... aha ha ha..."

It is choked and gurgled, but it increasingly grows in clarity.

Horried, Helmich turns back around just in time to see her unsteadily rise to her feet, a hulking figure in white staunchly contrasting against the drab background. The knife slides out without direct interaction, forced out and sent skittering across concrete by regenerating organs. His face turns pale as he sees the wounds he inflicted draw the dripping blood back into itself and close up as if an invisible zipper moved over them. Flesh sealed shut and skin regrew. Sparkling red threads brought shredded white together, torn fibers drawing its brethren from its host for repairs. Her neck snaps audibly as she straightens and turns her head to survey him with a wicked, bloody grin.

"Ha ha... good move."

Stunned, he can do nothing as she staggers over and fondles a cache of fallen weapons with her hands, marveling at the chosen device's simplistic yet destructive design. Legs twitch, but cannot bring themselves to spirit his being away as a delicate hand lightly ghosts over the egg-shaped device, toying with the keyring at its end.

"If you wanted to play a harmless game of tag, you could have just asked..."

She rips the pin off, aims the grenade at him, and flings it, still smiling. Thorne strafes and ducks under cover just as the projectile detonates, shaking the ground behind him with a terrible explosion and sending his helmet flying. Ears ringing, he peeks up from cover when feels no other blasts go off nearby, just in time to see her readjust her aim towards his direction once more.

"Oh, shit!"

He scrambles away again, whipping out his pistol from his side. The handgun barks as he returns fire, but to his dismay, none of the bullets seem to have any effect on her besides making her inhuman grin even wider, if possible. His anxiety only grows as she casually sticks her hands into herself and extract each bullet with utmost care, jingling them merrily in a blood-soaked palm. Egg-shaped explosives dangle from individual fingers, taunting him with a death that he seeks but cannot yet obtain. Despite his best attempts to get away, she manages to get closer and closer, drawing nearer and nearer even though he runs and she walks at a leisurely pace.

Soon enough, she is before him now, sticking a boot-clad leg out and ensnaring it around his, cackling as dirt is forced into his mouth and nostrils from the fall. Spent ammunition clatters to the asphalt below as her hand catches his ankle and firmly latches itself around it, halting his feeble attempts to right himself once more. Ryuuko yanks him off unsteady feet with a single tug and, dragging his struggling body along the ground, effortlessly hoists him into the air. He dangles a foot off the ground despite her diminutive size.

In this way, she toys with her meal, dropping him repeatedly and almost allowing him to get away before picking him up and flinging him high into the sky. This sick game of 'send me to heaven' continues, only stopping when he no longer quite resists and she catches him by his throat. Ryuuko cocks her head to the side and brings it to his, coyly lapping at a stream of blood he wasn't even aware of until now. Her tongue traces the outline of his jaw, and her other hand ghosts over his body, picking through the weapons he had on hand.

"What game shall we play now, hmm? Perhaps, if you are willing, we can play limbo with trip mines? Or hopscotch with proxy mines? People piñata? I have two sticks right here after all... too bad they're sharpened and made out of solid life fibers, though. No matter, the game was meant to be played only once. Hm... how about surgeon simulator? I've always been interested in learning how many organs I can remove before a human dies. Or... how about hide and seek? If I win, you get a free trip to the inside of a COVERS- all expenses paid. If you win, I'll let you have a twenty second head start before I sic about... let's say... a hundred of them on you. How about it?"

He attempts to spit on her, the frothy liquid only managing to land before her foot.

"Fuck you!" he hisses between clenched teeth, choking when her impossibly titanic grip threatens to crush his windpipe.

Ryuuko tsks in disappointment, preparing to rip the pin off of yet another grenade with her teeth and shove it in his mouth for daring to disrespect this holy garb. But suddenly the mood changes, and she looks toward the darkened skies as a familiar tingle runs through her. Although her augmented senses inform her that nothing alive but herself and this paltry

platoon is nearby, the air feels heavy, as if she walked into a cave of bears. Her lips purse, and she drops the hapless soldier as a brilliant display soon burns bright like a bonfire a hundred kilometers away, neatly bisecting the black backdrop with bright blue and red. The remaining grenades she possesses clatter to the ground beside her, and the battered lieutenant looks up at her indifferent expression, chest heaving with panting breaths.

Thorne's punishment for the crime of laying his filthy eyes upon her for more than the briefest of moments comes swiftly. Only when the last pointed boot-toe finishes its savage journey across time and space to land squarely upon his face and Bakuzan stops humming its metallic tune did Ryuuko cease her efforts. Humming, she rolls Helmich over onto his back, eyes roving over his bruised body with feigned concern. Heels soon clack rhythmically as she walks away, freeing the secondary pistol from his belt as she passes by. Whistling a cheerful tune and twirling the gun by its trigger guard, she pauses only but for a brief moment, turning her head slightly to acknowledge his presence without bringing his crumpled form into view.

"Lucky for you, I have other business to attend to. Now, be a good boy. Roll over and try not to die, will you? It would be most... inconvenient."

It is eight thirty in the evening. It is three hours, twenty four minutes, and five seconds until the clock would strike midnight, to be exact. The night is deathly still, for the COVERS had already swept through the precinct and its neighboring lands, devouring the paltry remains of human life unfortunately caught in the midst of foraging for supplies. The bitter winds carry faint traces of ash and dust, where they settle atop the frozen city like a blanket. The last of the fires are finally dying out, returning the environment to its usual lifeless state.

Only one person resolutely braves the weather and choking smog that enshrouds the space before her. She stands straight and tall, posture perfectly upright and regal in appearance. They wait patiently into the night, letting the dying winds stroke life into dark wisps of hair. And wait. And wait. And when she finally speaks, her words come clear, enunciated so precisely in such a Satsuki-like manner that the words carry far beyond the boundaries of the apex they rest upon.

"Perhaps we should synchronize?"

Senketsu took his time to respond, eventually assenting with a short grunt.

"I had not meant to tell you this, but the night before Ryuuko and I saw you first wearing Junketsu, I felt a strange presence, as if something was tugging at my threads, pulling them every which way like magnetic fields. Ryuuko later mentioned that I was physically reacting to it as well, mentioning that I had... "goosebumps", I believe is what the term is. Perhaps the same could be said for them."

Satsuki gives him a curious look, but he does not elaborate further. Enough time has passed for her to place nearly her full trust in the kamui, and she is confident in his conclusions. With a calculated flick of her wrist, the pin is dislodged from the seki tekko, and Senketsu snaps tightly around her, stretching and conforming to her shape like a second skin. She feels

her blood coursing through her, screaming through her veins as it is drawn outward. Their resulting transformation sends a pulse-like shockwave rippling through the still air and lights up the night in a brilliant display of gleaming scarlet and fuchsia stars, dancing and intermingling with sapphire blue ones.

It does not take long before a blur of white shot past them, carelessly bounding off the sides of skyscrapers before majestically soaring in the air in a perfect parabolic arc. Ryuuko roared, knees slightly bent and hands outstretched towards her sibling like the talons of an falcon. Indeed, the white cloak majestically fluttering at her sides do nothing but amplify the effect, appearing as the hunting bird's mighty wings as both human and clothing bear down upon them with all the anger and wrath of a furious god.

She barreled into Satsuki at mach one, easily knocking her down and sending them both sailing clear into the cover of broken concrete walls and plaster husks. Satsuki let herself be swept away, easily fighting the urge to let a sly smile grace her fair features. The white cloak fluttered about, framing the brainwashed girl's genuflecting form as they fell and draped about her.

"Idiot," she hissed, roughly slamming her against the ground and angrily embedding her scissor sword into the ground below, the sharpened end a hair's width away from the soft flesh of her neck. It is obvious that a conscious effort was made to resist the temptation to bury it into the soft flesh of the elder's supple body instead. "What do you think you're trying to pull?"

Satsuki quietly reminds her of their truce, and Ryuuko releases the long locks of ebony hair prematurely, repeatedly plunging a curled fist through concrete-clad steel girders and wrenching it out in lieu of performing the action through her *dear* sister's spine. The sheer rage she experiences heats the air, visible as the weaving distortion of molecules in such a manner alike that of those that precede the appearance of steam.

"Don't pull that bullshit with me, Kiryuuin. Answer the question."

Satsuki maintains her calm façade, unnerved by the sudden show of murderous intent. First step: introduce doubt. Inject chaos and dissent within the ranks, and play her into better hands. Then, with one less rogue rook in play, the chessboard would rapidly be cleared in her path to the Queen. Second step? Survive if step one failed.

Clearing her throat, she looks her sister plain in the eye, making sure her back is perfectly straight to achieve the full effect of the Kiryuuin-patented intimidation tactic.

"I wanted to discuss our father."

"**You. *Murdered.*** Him," she half-shouts, interrupting the elder.

Satsuki's jaw clicks in irritation as she tightens it imperceptibly. "If I *did* murder him, wouldn't there be news reports on a global scale? A Kiryuuin heiress, murdering her own father? Surely there would be discussions regarding that."

"*You* covered it up."

"Impossible. The scale of an operation to kidnap a man of significant standing without attracting attention, sneak him into a city-state I control, and keeping him under my watch for several months on end without *anyone* getting suspicious is nearly impossible to execute."

Ryuuko snarled. "Bull. Shit."

"Matoi," Satsuki starts, but her hand is slapped away- hard- by Ryuuko's own, the brainwashed girl's other limb curled around the recently stolen pistol.

"Don't call me that," she spat, narrowing her eyes. "You imprisoned him in that filthy school of yours when he refused to betray mother and help your idiotic cause. And then you killed him when he didn't cooperate with that poor excuse for a so-called 'tailor' of yours."

Now it is the elder's turn to glare at the other as the younger leveled the lethal weapon at the center of her forehead. The provocative act does nothing else to break her usual sangfroid, however.

"So, how 'bout it, Satsuki? How 'bout I splatter your fucking brains across this shithole?"

"You will do no such thing." Satsuki easily replied. "Not when I hold all the answers and you know nothing."

A wheezing laugh, and then, "Know nothing? Know **nothing!?**"

A muted metallic click adds to the tense atmosphere as she turns the gun on herself, solidly placing the muzzle end at a temple, another following right after as the safety is flicked off.

Would it hurt?

She wants it. She wants to feel the sick impact of metal against flesh, the heat the bullet carries with it as it speeds by at a thousand kilometers per hour. But most of all, she wanted for just the briefest of moments to taste the sweet kiss of death- an act considered treasonous and sacrilegious of her kind, given their apparent invincibility. The tip pushes deeper against bone.

Was there something beyond the realm of the living?

"I'll show *you* **nothing!**"

A mad cackle splits the skies. It is an ugly sound that sends birds fluttering from their roosts nearby. A brief howl of despair follows suit, a strangled cry of horror licking at its heels. The screaming of blood trills musically, sings sweet in bulging veins, pushed through by equally shrieking hearts.

The gun fires once.

A single shell casing clatters to the ground. A fat droplet of blood strikes it on the way down, soon joined by several others.

Satsuki's expression is stoic, firmly locking eyes with similarly colored ones. A lock of dark hair lies next to the spent cartridge and Bakuzan Gako sits dangerously close to the restitched hybrid's ear, the cold blade skimming a cheek and just barely biting into the hair-covered cartilage. The black dagger's tip is locked with the pistol's muzzle, pushing the firing end up and away from its original target's vicinity.

Quietly, the ex-dictator resumes her speech, trusting that the abrupt irrational moment had long passed. The blade is withdrawn, the wound immediately sealing shut upon its exit.

"If what I say is false, then why do you have the scissor sword in the first place? Surely Ragyou herself would not think of her own daughter using such a crude weapon?"

The pistol is instantly traded for the more comforting, familiar feel of the black bladed wakizashi's grip. Fingers tighten around the red scissor sword, wrenching it from its embedded position within the metal support's iron hold.

"Shut up."

Fangs visibly flash against the dark flesh of her lips. Her agitation is more pronounced, and it shows in her tense muscles, her sudden change in position to a more aggressive show of force. Her fists are primed, ready to inflict untold amounts of pain on its unfortunate victims.

"Ask her why, if she cared so much for the daughter she allegedly loves, she did not bother to seek her out for all those months she was gone! Ask her why she only sought you out when it was convenient for her to do so! Ask her why, if she really thought of you as more than a pawn to play on this chess match of ours, she had not sent anyone to assist you! Ask her-!"

A curled fist is lobbed at her face- a sloppily executed move that is easily repelled with a side-block.

"Shut. Up."

"Ask her," Satsuki thunders, drawing uncomfortably close to the other and firmly leveling her gaze upon once-blue eyes. "Ask her for photographic evidence if your beliefs are justified. Surely there would be photos of you growing up through various stages of your life if it indeed were true!"

"Shut up!"

She is confused, and in her confusion, she lashes out and expresses it in the only language she knows how to speak as fluid as her snark-ridden Japanese- violence.

Three clicks signify three needles dropping into place. Blood rushes into the vacuum created by the new openings, soaking the strands and With a light blue glow around its edges, the god robe unravels, leaving her naked for the smallest fraction of a second before snapping into place, hugging her skin and perfectly accentuating every curve.

They gambol over the ocean and fallen city like tiger cubs. Although their aerial dance is spectacular and destructive in appearance, it is clear that Ryuuko, when sufficiently enraged,

only manages to coherently string thoughts enough to duel Satsuki to a draw rather than outright curb-stomp her even at full force.

But this is a different type of rage; this was a rage so Ryuuko-like and spontaneous that it was difficult for the elder not to display any sign of triumph. Violence, it seemed, was the universal language in a world where it would always be red vs. blue, Kiryuuin vs. Matoi, Ryuuko vs. Satsuki. It was innately known to both of their souls, even if one was corrupted and the other left scarred. She doesn't mind it when Ryuuko suddenly sinks her teeth into an arm and uses the iron grip her canines had on her flesh to quickly set off a barrage of punches to her solar plexus. The quick jab to her throat and the elbow to the bridge between her eyes isn't completely unwelcome either; all are signs that the delinquent spirit buried far under the thick haze of pleasure and false memories is sparking to life, rousing to a burning fire that soon quickly engulfs its host's being in a raging inferno. Her delinquent fighting style, adapted from an unusual mix of various non-Japanese martial arts and Tomari-te techniques, and further muddled by various street fighting moves, become more prevalent as time passes. They lock their blades in evenly-matched struggle, the shorter of the two pouring out her rage and bitter frustrations of her broken soul in a tidal wave of screams and slashes. And in between the song of blades and bellows, the elder takes care to provoke her further, to deliberately press into metaphorically open and healing wounds- anything to destabilize her.

"Why did you come to Honnouji Academy!? Think!"

"I came to avenge the death of my dad... because *you killed him!*"

A roar, and another swing of an extended scissor sword that nearly clips off more than a good portion of hair. Satsuki dodges the intended murderous act with relative ease, sidestepping it and allowing it to collide with the cement below. She casually steps on the blunted edge of the scissor half and firmly rests her weight upon it, preventing its owner from easily parting its company from its new resting place.

"And how did you find out about his death, if what you say is true and that I covered it up? Surely the Kiryuuin family's influence would have been sufficient enough to prevent any whisper of his alleged death from escaping, even without the allure of the bottomless wealth we possess."

"Nui," Ryuuko rasped, red pupils contracted to mere specks in a sea of white. "Nui told me what a backstabbing traitor you were. We fought about a year ago. You gave me insomnia, and sent your flunkies to feed me lies and shit, all for your petty plans of rebellion in hopes of killing her. But now mother set me straight. Made me remember all that I forgot. I know about your silver tongue and snake oil. False hopes and all that bullshit promises you gave everyone just to get them to your side."

"And mother didn't do anything about it? Surely with all her resources, finding her husband should have been a trivial matter for her, as well as extracting him without needing your help? After all, why send a single child to go into a deathtrap, when she has hundreds at her beck and call, all who are all too willing to die for her in the first place?"

A brute shove and a shoulder check all but dislocated the ex-President from her position, and the red blade was retrieved by its incensed owner.

"...Bitch."

Her resolve is weakening, this Satsuki knows as much. She is prying at something that was not meant to be opened, something both kamui and wearer had long kept suppressed and buried within the enthralling tide of blissful ignorance. Improperly managed, it would have caused untold ruin- either Ryuuko would lash out in confusion as both false and true memories unhappily clash with each other, or she would outright reject her past and see it as yet another brainwashing tool that was allegedly employed against her. It was a delicate matter, and something to be refined over a long period of time. But time was of the essence, and so Satsuki pushed forward, weakening the chain links that bound Ryuuko's brain to its prison, one by one.

"And what about kamui Senketsu? Surely, Ragyou wouldn't produce a "dishrag", as you called him, for you to have worn before outfitting you with Junketsu. Admit it! Whatever Ragyou told you or promised you is nothing more than smoke and mirrors. You are **nothing** to her. If all she cares about is letting the life fibers destroy Earth, then what are you to her ambitions? You are a mere pawn in her game, and by helping her, you are failing at your mission to avenge our father!"

Father.

A violent memory shook her, caught her off guard and rattled her brain, searing through the false happy memories like hot knives through butter. Images flashed before her in succession like a black parade, one right after another, with only milliseconds in between for her to view them. Arriving at the academy with a measured weight on her back and fiery determination rushing through her veins. Pushing through hundreds of faceless, indistinct bodies and screaming defiance at the head of Honnouji. Suffering a crippling defeat, but still yet resisting the oppressive demand to bow down, to submit to the ruling five's whims and integrate seamlessly into the school structure. The ruins at the outskirts of town. A fall, and a slit that ran perfectly down the length of her wrist. A dark figure leaping at her, clinging to her skin and digging into the bleeding wound. A moment of pain, and then the warm bliss of euphoric power racing through her body.

And then, the house fire from her dream. The fires in the air, glowing red, silhouetting the smoke on the breeze. The crackling of flames as they tore through the mansion, burning bright and impregnating the sky with dying embers of red and orange. The photograph nestling in the treehole. The girl with a streak as red as fresh blood, glumly staring at something only she could see.

The unmistakable truth.

-with open eyes, I breathe again-

Visions from a previous life, cut down in its prime. A family. A name.

Mako?

-help me follow life wherever it goes-

Whispers of the past.

Doubts crawling at the back of her mind.

-I'm living in a world of dreams-

Butterfly kisses trail from her mouth, down her neck, over her breasts, and onto her abdomen, sending no short supply of shivers and needy panting moans from her mouth. An exchange of roving hands, and the blissful aftermath that followed.

The sweet promises of the future, of a life fiber-dominated universe.

-fear and pain-

Blood and blade. A scissor, a sword, and its sheath, wet with something sticky, something red, something issuing forth like roses in the snow on a tattered lab coat.

"Never forget, Ryuuko. Never forget..."

~and love will reign o'er me~

It's too much to bear.

"I've... forgotten..." she silently mouths to herself, brokenly sinking to her knees under the weight of the revelation. The scarlet sword, long a symbol of regrets and resentment, is stuck perpendicularly into the concrete beneath her in one violent gesture, while the longer Bakuzan half clatters emptily to the ground with hollow clinks. She doesn't make a move to retrieve it. Instead, she kneels before her blade and blankly stares straight ahead, both hands gripping the straight-edged handle as knuckles whiten, turn pale with unmatched strength coursing in her unnaturally tight grip. The spines aligning her back quiver the slightest bit.

Satsuki watches Ryuuko unravel before her into a deathly-still human-shaped mess. She doesn't cry out in agony, doesn't say a word, doesn't burst into a sobbing wreck, for surely one cursed to be forever bound to the life fibers that both seeded life and destroyed it as well could no longer shed tears. But the girl continues her stubborn streak of unknowingly destroying every schema and conceptualizations others ignorantly possessed, and soon, the elder catches the faintest twinkle of pooling water gather at red-streaked eyelids, unshed wetness moistening the bright scarlet orbs.

When the former President speaks again, her words are quiet and confident, doused in the usual infuriatingly calm tone she used when speaking to an inferior. She walks until she is directly behind Ryuuko, knowingly moving herself directly into the possible path of her stolen wakizashi, where it is gripped with white knuckles and restless hands but not removed from the golden chain that binds it to its corrupted owner's side.

"Do you really believe all that she says? Is your trust in her word absolute if she herself cannot provide proof to further her claims, to allow you to become your own person, to be more than she wishes you to be?"

Silence. The brainwashed girl's lack of speech spoke volumes in her stead. Her rage spent, Ryuuko remains frozen where she is like a statue carved by the masters of time, despair and vitriol replacing the acid sting of red rage in her veins. The holes in her memory were ever so prominent now, glaring vibrantly against the subdued backdrop of a happy childhood and a normal upbringing. A harsh life of misery mixes unpleasantly with a sickeningly saccharine one, tainting the blissful "memories" with- in her opinion- something foul, something rotten and best left for dead. Something that she had forgotten. Her humanity.

Ryuuko Matoi didn't come into this world fumbling for meaning. She spared no thought for philosophizing on idiosyncrasies or the folly of humanity or the unfairness of the universe or the biased ways of the world. She was created for the sole purpose of satisfying a selfish woman's quest to find the perfect heir for her plot to end the world, a fallback plan of sorts when the aforementioned woman's first experiment was a failure. She was birthed to fulfil one singular purpose. In a way, her inheritance was neither monetary nor physical, but genocidal in origin, for the sacred garb of ceremony she donned upon her body was indeed meant to be a wedding dress- one that bound her to her duties in carrying out the will of the life fibers. Extinction of every living thing on the planet. The damnation of the universe and everything beyond it to the mercy of the life fibers here.

Suddenly, she her face takes a grave appearance, makes her appear to have aged twenty years in twenty seconds. She rises wordlessly, gathering her things and setting them to her hip. She retrieves the handgun and presses the M11 pistol into her sibling's open palm. And, still as quiet as the whispers of death, she quickly leaves in a flurry of white, whipping into nothingness with the passing of a stray snow flake.

It's been hours. She's ran- and flew- halfway across Asia and back, just trying to shake the conflicting feelings she'd been having recently. Satsuki's words gnawed at her conscience at every waking moment, picking away at the barriers of her mind relentlessly.

She's wrong. There was no way that mother didn't care for her that much, right? She *did* raise her single-handedly. Made her an heiress to the Kiryuuin name. Gave her a perfect life and outfitted her with a superior god robe of her own design... ...Right?

It's all wrong. Everything said was wrong. ...But it felt so right at the same time. It made sense.

To a broken soul, it is pure torture.

In a fit of hysteria, she mentally reached with shaking 'hands', feebly called out to Junketsu, only to receive nothing but radio silence- dead air- on the other end despite their still-synchronized state; the kamui either couldn't respond or completely refused to. Not even blood roused the desperately wanted honeyed tones to materialize in her mind. She wasn't sure what happened or where its presence went. All she knew was the cold sweat that materialized on pale skin, and the even colder blood that chilled her bones, the mad desperation of an addict waiting for their next fix. Because pain was the only other option to

keep these thoughts at bay, and not even the worst gash she inflicted on her soft flesh was even comparable to the departure of Junketsu's presence.

But still, it didn't respond.

And at last, exhausted, she quit her antics and rested against a wall, letting her doubts wash over her like a typhoon over a sandy shore. The orgasmic bliss, the heat that welcomingly warmed her body and sent her mind into a blissful tizzy was slowly but surely eroding far past levels thought imaginable, giving way to multidimensional numbness and paranoia, a mania that clawed at her relentlessly and urged to be soothed with the god robe's care and attention.

It was the longest six hours of her life.

Part of her did want to go up to mother and simply ask her about it, she honestly did. But Kiryuuns- any and all of them, in fact- were creatures known to forsake forthrightness at any given chance for the pleasure of watching their enemies squirm beneath them. And outright asking mother for any information would signal her malcontent with their plans, of her disassociation with the mental prison within the blissful dream-like state.

And, despite her misgivings, she eventually decides to go through with her new suspicions and wanders around the Kiryuuin manor, clinging to the walls and slipping in rooms long left unattended. If Akiko or the rest of the inverse devas had noticed anything about her strange behavior while passing by after a short sparring session amongst themselves, they didn't say a word to her and certainly not even a whisper to Ragyou or any of the rainbow woman's associates. None of the large paintings hanging on the wall ever show that she had ever lived in this mansion at all, nor did they show anything but Ragyou in various poses, Satsuki on occasion, or even more rarely, both of them together. Only one or two of them showed her father, but Ryuuko suspected it to be more of a front more than anything else, since they were strategically placed in the darkened hallways, corridors that were most likely to have been used only a couple dozen times per year.

She feels sick. Stupid. Foolish. Gullible. A thousand words and a thousand meanings, with a thousand awful expressions more churning unpleasantly inside her. How, in all the years she had allegedly lived here, did she not notice such a glaring fact?

'Maybe she moved them,' she thought hopefully, 'Maybe she put them in the basement or something...'

But it still didn't make sense to her. If she was indeed the favored child all her life and had indeed possessed a picturesque childhood that could easily make billions green with envy, how come only her pictures-if any- were removed? Maybe then all her questions would be solved.

There was only one way to find out.

Robotically, her feet moved, one after another. Clockwork. Perfect in rhythm, with no lag nor hurried frenzy to its music, a song of heels and footsteps. A melody that continued to grace

the empty marble corridors until plush carpeting muffled its voice and choked it into oblivion when she stopped.

Before her was a door.

It wasn't just any door, however. It was the one she remembered as her bedroom, hued in cheerful pinks and yellows and blues, and filled to the brim with plush animals that her mother knew she liked. It called to her, tugged at every fiber in her being, singing its sweet siren song and drawing her closer.

A sense of dread suddenly filled her, and she dug her heels firmly into the thick rug, resisting the magnetic pull. She knows not why she is terrified, but the false memories she thinks true cry out in opposition, fighting for self-preservation as if having a will of their own.

Something presses upon her brain, pushing her forward, however. It is woefully familiar, and it is welcomed with the joy of a thousand greetings, the unified cheer of a decrepit village when the ruler that brought nothing but peace and prosperity during their reign returns to the throne.

'Junketsu?' she thought back, confused.

The tug on her mind intensifies in response. 'Go,' the kamui mutely demands in its actions, and while uncertain, she decides it best to obey the rock that withstood many a raging storm, standing fast even in the most terrifying of typhoons.

Junketsu never betrayed her. Junketsu was there for her in the beginning. After all, Junketsu was originally made for their Kiryuuin heir. The one that would bring the family to glory and bring fruit to the generations of endless labor. The one that would be in perfect concordance with the life fibers. The one that would gladly take it as its master, and with it at her side as its disciple, would wield its powers over those too weak, too pitiful to understand their cold, flawless logic and unmatched strength. A sleeping dragon that was beginning to test her wings, to breathe fire and rain meteors upon the world, unaware of her own strength. It was made for her. Right?

Drawing back once again on the miraculous lockpicking skills she didn't even know she possessed until the day before, she forced her way into the one room that would explain everything. Slipping inside and shutting it behind her to prevent unwanted suspicion, she squinted in the dim light pouring through a tiny slitted window plastered with nailed wooden boards only to find something that angered and befuddled her even more.

The room was completely empty- no bed, no furniture... nothing.

In fact, it wasn't even a bedroom at all, if the gutted interiors were any indication. Of the remaining decorative inlays that remained, it was clear that this was formerly either a storage room or a lab of sorts.

'*Maybe she put this here after I grew up,*' she mused, idly scuffling her boots against the steel flooring. '*But...*' she thought again with a frown. '*I lived here all my life... didn't I?*'

A large blanket of dust is kicked into the air at the sudden movement, and she sneezes repeatedly, only barely managing to stifle them with an arm before her illegal presence within this part of the mansion is announced to its few remaining inhabitants. She walks, slowly, anxiously charting the interior of the room. Old CRT screens leer at her from above- eyeless faces watching her. Pointed metal and warped steel loom from the inky black world around her- claws from a beast lurking in the shadows, waiting to strike.

It is easily a daunting maze in the best of times, and a deathtrap in these conditions.

But her senses, so far beyond that of normal humans, doesn't need much light to identify and decipher what was around her. Even with her eyes closed, she could "see" through Junketsu's eyes and navigate perfectly in near-total darkness, as long as they were synchronized. They continue to slink around the strange room together, everything appearing in varying tinges of faint yellow and vibrant viridescent color.

There was a giant machine of sorts that sat at the end of the corridor, preceded by various obsolete computers dating back at least two decades prior. Huddled against the center of a wall, its height easily reaches the tall ceiling above and dominates the scene before her. It is square, housing a small rectangular chamber visible only by a pane of glass, with corrugated metal piping feeding into its top and wires streaming from shattered panels.

Lining its sides is a wall of filing cabinets, all black and sealed shut with a thin strip of metal inside. Ryuuko ignores the machine, knowing the shortage of power rendered it all but useless, and stalks instead to the tall metal boxes. With the goal so tantalizingly close to her reach, she doesn't bother being cautious anymore. She needs answers- now. Fingers curl around silver handles, and she rips them open with a single tug, letting the ruined locking mechanisms tinkle uselessly on the tiled flooring below one right after the other. Papers spill, fluttering to the ground like freshly fallen snow.

Piercing sangria moves over the neatly typed and handwritten observations as files are greedily snatched from their resting place. Most of them include lengthy explanations of the physiology of life fibers, as well as their molecular structure and studies introducing quantitatively set amounts of the parasite onto control groups of test mice. However, two manila folders in particular catch her eye- two slim folders that are all that inhabit the lonely "K" subgroup. Curious, she pulls them out and opens one, noting that only a single page of interest was slotted between the stiff backing, wedged under various photos of the subject in question, charts, and a long-winded hypothesis.

Subject: Satsuki Kiryuuin

DOB: 1995年05月23日(火)

Age at testing: 1 year, 2 months, 9 days

Date: 1996年07月31日(水)

Gender: Female

Test Duration: 39 minutes

Status: Alive

Notes: Rejected synchronization with indirect contact with life fibers. Genomic analysis showed that while most regulatory systems preventing synchronization are not present, it is not currently known exactly what prevented its implementation. Speculating that age may be

a factor. Will take measures to introduce gradually increased prenatal exposure for next subject.

The other file matches the first in almost every way, with the only exception being the lack of a photograph paperclipped to the folder.

Subject: [Redacted]

DOB: 1996年11月06日(水)

Age at testing: 9 hours

Date: 1996年11月07日(木)

Gender: Female

Test Duration: 13 minutes

Status: Terminated

Notes: Younger sibling to Satsuki. Experiment involved directly infusing [redacted] grams of life fibers extracted from [redacted] rather than derivatives into the spinal region, under the occipital bone. Although promising in synchronization at the beginning of experiment (tolerance to infusion), subject unfortunately shared same resistance to life fibers. Vitals rapidly dropped over the course of a minute and subject perished. Genomic analysis not performed. Body disposed of and marked for later incineration. Terminating trials with the Kiryuuin line in interest of saving costs and time.

Her lips purse, disapproving. Instead of finding answers, she had encountered nothing but questions instead.

The files are united with the dusty flooring, where they lie, sharply contrasting the otherwise ordered decay. Steady heel clicks usher the brainwashed hybrid out the room wordlessly. The single sliver of light birthed from her intrusion narrows, lingering on Satsuki's baby photograph a moment longer before it is obliterated. In the distance, a door clicks shut, and the place where it all began is sealed once more, leaving it in lonely solitude once more.

To go forward, one must go back.

Indeed, that is what a wise man would say when confronted with a problem that seemed impossible to solve from an outsider's standpoint. The place of origin- the source of all her misery, and the answer to all her questions. The journey of a thousand miles began with but a mere step, but what did one do when the road brought one exactly where they started?

She landed on the deadened grass with all the grace and force of a falling meteor, gazing with a somewhat wistful expression at the ruined mansion beyond the brick gate. Hesitantly, she stepped past the frozen lawn and slunk inside, heels clacking softly against the cracked asphalt and gravel driveway. She doesn't mean to, but she slips a hand in the jagged treehole and retrieves the photograph that spawned her doubts, caressing its frame gently, almost lovingly, as she trespasses further. Ryuuko moved slowly, extending a foot out and hesitantly testing the boards by placing a small fraction of her weight upon it before committing to fully shifting her mass onto it.

She continues in this manner, sticking to the shadows in her quest, barely daring to breathe. Even though the inhabitants and squatters had long been cleared out, an oppressive aura hung about the area as if it consciously was aware of her trespassing- a ghost long in the making now coming back to haunt the hollow shells of the living and the damned.

She treads carefully, picking her way across the various ruined rooms. Her sweeping gaze is sharp, blind to everything but that which she seeks, and she is soon richly rewarded for her efforts.

There it was. A safe.

It was embedded into the ground, partially sunken in the bamboo wood paneling as the boards caved in under its weight. Just as its producer had boasted, it had survived the fire unscathed with naught but a charred paint coating. Unfortunately, the design also heavily relied on multiple means of access as a security measure in case a thief had managed to steal its keys; reinforced steel deadbolts and combination wheels barred the way. But who needed keys and combinations when life fiber augmented abilities did the trick just fine?

Reaching out, Ryuuko grabbed the handle and tugged, twisted, and yanked until it came free from the metal contraption it was wedged to. Then, it was only a matter of plunging a hand through the thick plating, ripping out the delicate contents within until a manageable hole was created, and using the aforementioned hole to rip the remainder of the door clean off its reinforced hinges.

No documents spill out at such a violent act; rather, hundreds of thousands of yen banknotes do- an obvious placator to less scrupulous thieves. What she seeks, however, lies at the back of the safe, wedged behind an impressive stack of research papers. Brushing the now-useless currency out of her way, she pressed ahead, hands trembling as she extracts her target from its resting place of many months. It is disconcerting to see more remnants of a past apparently fabricated, and she shivers in anticipation. Fake documents, forged identities, photos, and a journal return to the world outside. Fingers begin to pry open a book and free this tome of knowledge from its dusty chains.

She hesitates, breath caught in her throat. She wants to open and read them, she really does.

But she is scared. She does not know if she will like what she finds, if the calculated risk was worth her efforts. She shakes in indecision, suddenly ashamed of herself and her childish fears. And, swallowing a thick wad of saliva, braces herself for the worst to come.

"Matoi... Ryuuko..." she murmurs, flipping through the miraculously undamaged pile of legal papers and scanning them, quickly tossing aside those of little relevance. "Born... Saitama prefecture... father... Matoi Isshin... mother... Matoi Yui?"

She pauses, visibly stunned. Nobody mentioned a 'Yui' before, not even that rat of a sibling.

Further rifling dredges up a death certificate and the scrap of information that Yui allegedly died two years after giving birth to Ryuuko. Confused, she continues to probe, practically burying her nose into the mountain of paperwork, only to find no other mentions of the strange woman that supposedly had given birth to her. An insatiable hunger fills her- one that

yearns to be quelled with knowledge and burns brightly in the dim corners of her mind, struggling under the stiff confines of the mental prison she is confined within. Dozens of pages are scanned in minutes by enraptured eyes and swift fingers. His life's work, lab notebooks detailing his discoveries as a result of his experiments with life fibers, and even mentions of Ragyou are interspersed within the pages, barely legible under many revisions, dried remains of spilled substances, and sloppily executed kanji.

There were photo albums, too. Two and a half binders' worth of photos had been placed carefully within reinforced pages. It is obvious that the subject had no idea that the photographer has been taking her picture, for there were many shots at which the angles were too oddly positioned, the focus too blurred, and the pictures taken too far away, with the girl in them being the only subject matter. Playing with a ball in a local playground, nursing her wounds with little but a spare bandage she pulled from a pocket, decking a larger opponent in her face- all were fair game. In neat handwriting with an extremely fine pen, writing so unlike the messy thoughts and observations within the journal, dates had meticulously been marked on the side, along with a terse explanation or note.

The hairs on the back of her neck rise. A feeling akin to that of spiders crawling across her skin accompanies the freakish sensation.

Lying prone on the blackened and sooty floor, she forces herself to relax and props herself up with her elbows, easily juxtaposing the journal entries and the albums with dovetailed pages. And like puzzle pieces falling perfectly into place, her life story unfolds before her. A red carpet rolling out for the star of her own show. A tale that blends elements seamlessly, all told from the eyes of a third person.

'Breakthrough in materials research. Fusing knowledge of crystals formed during various heating processes and life fibers to create a hardened life fiber construct. Need to remember to send care package today.'

'2003年11月06日(木). Shot A took on her seventh birthday.'

'Second year at Ox Academy. 2004年03月01日(月). M noted a local boy approached her and repeatedly pulled at her red bang despite adult intervention. Ryuuko noted to have cried in pain and punched him once. Allegedly broke his arm. Cried for hours and hid red streak afterward. Noting increased sensitivity of those particular hairs.'

'Doctor [Redacted], henceforth known as Mi, had noted Ryuuko to be about 1.47 m, and 38 kg- unusually scrawny for a 12-year old, but extremely fit and healthy otherwise. Dr. Mi had noted teachers complaining about her behavior again- specifically her inability to stop fighting with other children- and was perplexed at her apparent invincibility. Other children would come back with broken bones after getting kicked repeatedly in their ribs, but Ryuuko would walk away with nothing but a bruise. Could it be...?'

'Date unknown. School trip to Okunoshima. Appears to tolerate rabbits. Dislikes reptiles, however.'

'Last day of first year in junior high school.'

'Ryuuko successfully fighting against a local gang of delinquents. Unsure whether to be proud or not.'

'Fourteenth birthday. Sent A to leave a present at her dormitory residence. D reports that she hasn't been back for several days now. Need to assign several more guardians to watch over her. Apparently, this is something she does once every few months.'

'Ryuuko observed watching after neighborhood kids instead of studying.'

'16th birthday. Next year, for her birthday, I'll arrange it so that we can finally reunite. Hopefully, both of my projects will be finished in time. I got a mold of her hands as part of an art project. Ryuuko complied after threatening to beat him to a pulp. Need to remember to compensate him handsomely. Tailoring the handle to her grip for maximum efficiency.'

'One half of the dual swords are done. It is a design quirk to model them after scissors, but they appear to handle better than conventional one or two handed sword designs. They are more durable than either of my previous projects. I suspect they may be practically indestructible, with the engineering and materials research I used in its creation.'

'Ryuuko and the neighborhood dogs. 194 days left...'

'Ryuuko at a local festival. Appears to like chikuzenni the most, followed by sanuki udon noodles, and then various pan-fried items.'

The pages went on. Some shots within the album went chronologically out of order, the photographs appearing to have been hurriedly stuffed in slots already occupied. And in all those instances, the pictures appeared to have suffered from a minute case of water damage- the dried imprints of several droplets dotting the glossed paper backing, all centered on the girl with the curious red bang.

A tale of a miserable girl with a miserable life is spelled out before her. Birthed at a local hospital and stolen away back home despite the doctors' concern for the child's safety, she was subjected to experimental trials, seemingly ending in her death. Reborn with the power of alien life and imbued with the strength to crush nations and bring the world to its knees, she was entrusted to the most unlikely of parents and raised for years under their careful eye, only returned to the guardianship of one of her biological parents at the tender age of four. A man, obsessed with severing the alien threads that bound the Earth to its doomed fate, sending her away to live a life almost entirely free of his presence while he slaved away for years to ensure that forces beyond their comprehension wouldn't touch her. And, when he finally thought her fit to know the truth and become the father he was always supposed to be to her all along, had been saddled with growing fear, intelligence pointing towards the Kiryuuns becoming aware of his presence.

The last entry details his nervous excitement at finally seeing his daughter personally after a decade of leaving her to fend for herself- a bittersweet sentiment now that she understands the visions she had been plagued by. A meeting that ended with murder and arson. A willing acceptance of a life of pain and misery by the simple act of wielding the red scissor sword- the bane and drive to her existence.

A cold sweat breaks out over her. Paralyzed with the realization of the full extent of Ragyou's trickery, she notes with a growing horror that the warm comfortable feeling of euphoric bliss had all but disappeared.

A fist clenches, the veins underneath bulging visibly under taut skin and form-fitting white fabric. Suddenly hyper-aware of herself, she screams, a mighty roar of defiance to life. A perfect world and a perfect life- all but ruined with one fell swoop.

And it was all. Satsuki's. Fault.

But...

A puff of white- a snort of curling smoke and tongues of bright yellow fire from a roused dragon- escapes a reddened nose and fogs the chilly air it is forcefully pushed out.

Satsuki was right.

Her life was an entire lie after all. And the realization that their mother was a lying, cheating backstabber was not her fault, per say. It wouldn't have happened if their mother, if her mother actually loved her, actually cared for her.

The files drop to the ground, where they messily intersperse with shattered beakers and old test tubes that lay there for more than a decade. She lets her entire being droop, the weight of mixed truths and lies blending unhappily and bringing her spirits crashing down in more than one way.

Her mother...

Ryuuko's head snaps up viciously. The photograph she had been lovingly fingering slides from her lap and falls atop the charred wood as she lets out a terrifying snarling growl, digging her fingers into herself to prevent a premature explosion of rage. Her mind sings with frothing rage, a sentiment that the lurking kamui within fosters almost lovingly, fluidly and effortlessly directing the symphony of her hatred and bloodlust like a conductor for the world's top-performing orchestra. It feeds on it, and in return, injects more and more half-conclusions and paranoid schemes into its wearer's brain, starting the cycle anew.

Her mother must be punished.

Everyone must be punished.

However...

She couldn't go against her mother directly. Surprise attacks from above wouldn't work anyway now that Ragyou had an intimate knowledge of her fighting style. Ragyou didn't know about her latest findings, nor did she suspect anything out of the ordinary. Right now, she probably was continuing to chalk her frequent outings towards some sort of irrational behavior. Maybe she thought it was in part of her trying to find a "mate"- whatever that meant within the entire nonsensical bullshit speech she spewed after their session together. Whatever it was, it was buying her time, and that was all that mattered.

Fulfilling the contract made with the god-king- the primordial life fiber- and bringing the Kiryuuin legacy passed down from generation to generation to fruition was already a titanic task in its own right. Spilling familiar blood however, was harder.

But...

Liberate, not subjugate...

There was always one person who she could always rely on, no matter how stubborn or downright idiotic she was at times. All she needed was a little help assistance from dear old dad and some... motivation...

"Shit," Ryuuko swears, letting her forehead rest against a charred wooden wall and a fist to uselessly strike at the sooty paneling beside it.

On the dawn of the second day, she is ambushed.

Well, ambushed was putting it too heavily in terms of implying her senses were maladroit in determining who was rapidly approaching her based on the gait and stride. In truth, she was kidnapped by the same person she had mentally tortured less than twelve hours before, and without a murder attempt accompanying such a gesture this time, surprisingly.

But none of that mattered right now, for Ryuuko had a very funny way of showing others that they were right.

She is lying against her sister's stomach, back pressed against her breasts and mouth matching the grim expression that plastered itself on her kidnapper's face. Her former sword digs into her side, its kashira jutting deeply into muscled flesh and unrelentingly pressing against her hip bone. Arms that could easily bend steel I-beams to perfect ninety-degree angles and squeeze the life out of an elephant with naught but a mere muscle twitch hold her gently, wrapped around her trunk with a certain degree of self-awareness. High above sea level, soaring above nothing but empty ocean, she could easily plunge to her death if her captor had chosen in this moment to let her passenger free. But she knows that she will never do such a thing, for her psychological gambit is working, and the poor hand she had been dealt with is much easier to manage with an ace up her sleeve. Surreptitiously, she sneaks a look at the visage of her sister, almost astonished to find something more than hate twinkling in those shrunken eyes of hers, so unnaturally shaped and hued and too much alike that of their shared mother. *Almost.*

Ryuuko looks awful.

The red trisecting streaks that highlight the savage flame-colored pupils do nothing to hide the bags forming underneath. Her appearance looks more haggard than haughty, more fatigued than feral. The disheveled mane of hair she proudly sports sticks up more than usual, and her entire being smells of ash and fire. It is obvious that sleep had eluded her still for the

past week, and recent events had done nothing but exponentially make her condition worse. Satsuki fights the need to smirk at her sibling's expense.

Perfect.

But the fact that Ryuuko doesn't seem to be bothered at all by the strain of carrying someone while synchronized slightly concerns her, if only for the fact that she still had no idea how much endurance both kamui and wearer had.

'How long had they been synchronized?'

Based on her recent irrational behavior as of late, she could only hazard a guess that they probably hadn't unsynchronized since their fight a mere half-day ago. But it almost seems impossible, too far-fetched even if the two parties were in concordance with one another- not even her adamantine will and Senketsu's freely-given power was enough to stretch their transformation well past the one hour mark. Satsuki almost doesn't want to think of the inhumane process that both of them must have went through to be able to stay this way for such long periods of time without being drained.

They touch down at the stone entrance of the manor, blue-toed heels barely brushing against the massive wooden doors, where they had fallen off their hinges and been swept quite a distance away from their origin by the tides of time. Satsuki looks at her questioningly, silently asking why they didn't just land in the middle of the burnt wreck, but Ryuuko merely rolls her eyes and slowly grinds her words out, as if she were speaking to a mere toddler.

"This building's not as sturdy as what you built your shitshow of a school with. If we landed in there, we would plunge through and you. Will. **Die.** I however, will be able to stroll out of there perfectly fine. No wonder mother obviously loves me more than she does with you." At her silence, she sighs in exasperation. "Lighten up. You'll see. Try to keep up."

The wood underneath creak warningly with every ounce of weight she places upon there. The shock at such deterioration after only about a year's worth of neglect quickly melts into that of self-preservation. Intuitively deciding to stick near the walls, she scoots along their path, following the darting flash of white as Ryuuko leaps and bounds from the tops of crumbling walls on all fours like a cat, too prideful to follow behind her. She navigates almost blindly, squinting in the dim rays of the morning sun, footsteps hesitant and following in the pattern of the nuki ashi she taught herself when Ragyou was angry, was dangerous for a mere seven year old to be around within a five hundred meter radius. Glass crunches underfoot, and she trips over fallen support beams more than once, earning a guffaw at her expense.

Indeed, had it not been for the fire, it would have appeared as if life had been perfectly frozen in that single instant. A porcelain bowl and a folded pair of hashi at its side. Pictures in frames, their transparent coverings blackened and covered by smoke and paper payloads all but reduced to ashes. A fountain pen and an inkwell perched above yellowed, mildewy paper, as if its author had merely left but for a moment to rest and fully intended to return to their labors. Broken cabinets made out of fine cherry and mahogany wood, holding broken china within. A wall with a strange vertical slit. A ghost of an image of a human skeleton underneath, its physical ruins having long been carted away for proper burial and autopsy.

She shudders. She doesn't want to think of the poor person's identity.

But, deep down, she knows.

And it kills her inside.

The only oasis in this sea of ruins is the island patch of steel that lays slightly off to the side, perfectly centered in the middle of broken bricks and crumbling cinderblock walls. In its younger years, it might have been camouflaged perfectly with the rest of the surrounding ground, but the test of time had all but eroded its coverings away. Consciously, she moves towards it, only to find a gloved hand wrapped around her wrist.

Ryuuko spots her glaring at where their flesh touches.

"You don't want to go down there," she intones warningly, roughly jerking her along and forcing Satsuki to stumble slightly as she is pulled onto Ryuuko's back- a confused rider mounted atop a cunning dragon. They further wade into the path and into the dark recesses of the expansive building, Satsuki clinging onto Ryuuko like a newborn koala as each wild jump the other makes threatens to dislodge her.

She is set down a moment later, with nothing but a chasm separating them from what the delinquent claimed as their final destination. When Satsuki is hesitant to cross the threshold, taking note of the many holes in the flooring that lead to a seemingly bottomless pit (and death, always an important factor to consider), Ryuuko snorts impatiently, easily picks her up by the scruff of her neck, heaves her over her head, and throws her onto the other side.

The short flare of anger she experiences upon such a brute method is quickly squashed when she sees what she landed nearby- a safe hastily re-stuffed with piles of text and scrawlings, thousands of papers and millions of yen. The writing is dark, and the papers still crisp and white; it is almost as if the ink had dried mere moments after its author had just finished writing, and they had unceremoniously burst into his study and stumbled upon his papers. But what catches her attention, begs for it like lights to a moth, is the frame containing a single picture of two people.

It takes her all but a half second to identify Ryuuko, dressed in a simple blouse and skirt combination, stricken with a dour expression and forlornly gazing at something behind the photographer. The way the brainwashed girl stiffens sharply and bristles visibly the longer she continues to handle it serves as an effective reminder that she is still walking on a very fine line. She mutely replaces it in Ryuuko's hands, the latter briefly disappearing and allowing her to move onto the safe's contents at her own leisure.

Ryuuko patiently waits as Satsuki devours the text before her relentlessly, absorbing its contents with the finesse required of someone of her caliber. The journals, blatantly forged birth certificates, a death certificate, lab notebooks... even the creepy photo albums consisting entirely of pictures of a blatantly unobservant Ryuuko growing up through the years using a powerful lens- nothing was left untouched.

"May I?" she asks only out of consideration, holding up the notebooks and journal for emphasis- she had conditioned Ryuuko this far, and stepping on her toes and ruining all her

work was not high on her list of priorities. "Iori and Inumuta would want to see it."

Ryuuko grunts indifferently in response, prodding her to hurry up with an exaggerated eye roll.

"Thank you," she honestly replies when the ex-delinquent does nothing else, willingly allowing herself to be seized by white kamui-clad arms and spirited away after securely tucking said books against her chest. "I'll see if I can return them to you as soon as possible."

'Ryuuko is different,' she thinks, watching her in the corner of her eye as they speed past cities and towns left as mere husks of themselves.

Others may fool themselves, but Satsuki knows. Ragyou had long forsaken any logical train of thought in pursuit of a foolish ideology that would doom trillions of lives- both human and non-human- and doom countless planets to a fate worse than death. Nui followed in a similar vein, having been raised to be a fanatical loyal servant of the life fibers; in fact, she wasn't sure whether the blonde herself was even human. Ryuuko, however, was still stubborn enough to maintain a semblance of her own will, even when brainwashed and guided roughly by a force other than fate.

And it is for this reason that she entrusts her life in her sister's with absolute faith, even when they fight not as allies, but as arch enemies.

Satsuki notices that Ryuuko doesn't visit their agreed drop-spot as long as she was visibly present. She does seem to always know where she is, however, seemingly always looking in her direction between bites. It is always paired with a scowl though, although the action holds no weight to it and lasts only for a few seconds.

A healthy color started spreading across her cheeks again, and the sharp primal hunger that made her eyes malicious and predatory was no longer quite there unless she happened to be synchronized with her kamui. A sudden shift in recovery in comparison to the normal human, perhaps, but such a drastic rebound was a trivial matter when life fibers were involved.

Sometimes, she'd see her on occasion in the most random areas. Sitting in an abandoned car, straddling a motorcycle, fingering a random object she picked up by chance... Even milling about, just staring at the birds or any of the remaining wildlife in the area. In those instances, her hand is always resting on Bakuzan's grip, and not on the scissor sword, digits comfortably curled around the bloodstained white handle as if they had always belonged there.

There was one time she had seen Ryuuko holding her scissor sword, however. It was when she had missed the typical lunch offering and Houka noted that Ryuuko had not moved from Honnouji's apex for three entire hours. When Satsuki had flown in to investigate and touched down within the immense arena within the towering walls, she had only to look up to find Ryuuko, standing on the precipice of the tallest tower and staring back down at her with a look of complete detachment. Hair idly tousling in the wind, hands folded on top of each other and mounted atop a scissor blade held perpendicular to the ground, the sunlight glaring

behind her and catching her frame perfectly- it was a complete reversal of how they first met each other so many months ago.

She holds her Bakuzan half aloft, the almost comically tiny dagger pointing towards the practically glowing figure of her blood-sibling. She calmly utters a "Matoi Ryuuko" in hopes that a thunderous cry of "KIRYUUN SATSUKI!" would answer her greeting; a raging inferno of red and white meeting a steady wave of black and blue wouldn't have been unwanted either. A pipe dream of sorts, she later supposes, but any sign of normalcy after yet another startling revelation that turned Ryuuko's world onto its head- again- would've been welcome. Foolish actions bred foolish reactions, and she would gladly cast away all dignity if it meant provoking such precedented behavior from the other, if not for the sake of retrieving both her sister and a firm chance at rescuing the world from a cruel fate. Although her voice is quiet, there is no mistake that it didn't reach her ears, for Satsuki sees her glare darken and her stacked hands press the tip of the scissor half deeper into the concrete.

She bends her knees, waiting for the inevitable charge that would follow an ear-splitting kiai of her name, a war-cry that bayed for blood. Bakuzan Gako is gripped by the red-gloved hand, the other ready to rip the pin off and-.

Seconds pass.

Ryuuko doesn't respond.

When she was a proud dictator of her Academy, she would have scoffed at such a foolish gesture- barging into a stronghold, brandishing her sword like a common shiv or broken wine bottle, and challenging an enemy stronger than she was. In fact, she was like the wolf puppy that yapped at the eagle soaring above, ignorant of the danger the winged hunter's talons possessed- demonic claws that could easily tear into its fragile body, rend its bones askew and leave its organs spilling out in a bloody red tale of warning. But it is useless to ponder over such things to an enemy that neither notices nor cares about her invitation to battle. So she turns and leaves, feeling pinprick eyes track her as her legs melt into thrusters and Senketsu's eyes transform into wings. She departs, soon becoming nothing but a smudge of black amidst a blue sky.

These sightings are always cut short, however, when she picks up on their presence and practically vanishes, absconding the area with naught but two steps and a launch into the troposphere. Her departures are always silent. She is a ghost fading back into the dark recesses of two worlds, a wanderer unwanted in both of them, a cluster of shadows burning in the presence of light.

On the last day of their four-day truce, they share a quiet meal. In fact, it was entirely unplanned from Satsuki's standpoint; she had intended to leave it out there. However, she had spotted Ryuuko patiently waiting for her, lying against a support pillar and idly picking at the dried blood and gunk wedged underneath lengthened fingernails. No words are exchanged, but it is obvious that this meeting possessed a more cordial undertone than those of late.

Satsuki notes that Ryuuko's behavior is drastically different, even without the need for verbal communication. Having lived with Ragyou for far longer than she liked to admit, she had become somewhat of an expert in hiding her own body language while able to easily read

others' and manipulate that knowledge to her advantage. The sloppy posture, the glazed look in her inhumanly-colored eyes, and the almost submissive behavior... all are tell-tale signs of intense rumination. From this, she determines that her passionate speech and their impromptu session at the Matoi Manor had done more than broken through the mental haze and had shaken her reality up quite a bit. At its conclusion, they trade. For the notebooks that had once belonged to their father, Ryuuko places into her hands three yellow, lemon-like fruits, unbuckles the fine white cloak that rests upon her shoulders, and tosses it to her sibling.

"Junketsu?"

For a long while, there is nothing. And then, "You need it more than me," she says with a knowing look, disappearing into the snowy background with a quick heel turn once again, as she was wont to do.

She looks down at the offered foodstuff, and quickly identifies them as products resulting from a hybrid cross between a mandarin and a Ichang papeda. An eyebrow quirked in amusement.

Yuzu. Its name simply is its denotative vector and class of citrus fruit, but depending on how the gift itself was perceived by the recipient, its many meanings and half-meanings could have included 'reason', 'possess', 'superiority', and 'friend'. Satsuki wonders what meaning Ryuuko had chosen for this message, idly fingering the strange fruit in her hands. Bakuzan Gako gently cuts into the tiniest bit of a chosen citrus' flesh not a moment later, and she takes a small bite from an end, resolving to save the rest for later. She doesn't know whether the brainwashed girl's preference for the lemon-like fruit is another sign of her true consciousness struggling to break through and regain its dominance, and she dons the cloak, relishing the feel of luxuriously soft fur on her skin.

A lump lightly striking her side as it moves into place soon elicits more than a curious reaction. Inside a hidden pocket in the cloak's interior is a fist-sized wadded mass of paper, crumpled in upon itself until its inner layer very nearly matches the shape of its payload. Unfolding it, a silver-colored metal piece falls out, and she expertly catches it before its tumbling trajectory sends it spiraling off the edge into the dark abyss below. She holds it up to the light and sees Honnouji Academy's master key, an artifact gained only through raiding the student council office and managing to break into the safe where it was hidden inside an innocent-looking gutted hard drive. No doubt it was a lucky find, for not even the tech genius himself was aware of its presence.

Shielded from the harsh winter weather, she is gradually warmed until the cold is nothing more than a mere inconvenience to her rather than a life-threatening event. Being completely swathed in the expensive material, the blood underneath vigorously pulses with life anew, but it is even more so where her skin was touched so gently by her sister.

For clarification's sake, the cape/cloak Ryuuko was wearing was given to Satsuki, not the kamui. Because Ryuuko's personality has been dominated by the kamui, she demands to be referred by its name.

Ryuuko was actually a lot less vicious in earlier versions of this chapter. I was conflicted on how to write her character, but decided to make her sadistic, especially when not synchronized with Junketsu (hence the 'Send me to Heaven' game, which references the famous iPhone app).

Chikuzenni is another word for gameni, Ryuuko's favorite dish (canonically). Hashi = chopsticks; kashira = pommel.

Knife in the Dark

Chapter Summary

A simple infiltration goes horribly wrong.

Chapter Notes

I don't know of any English equivalent to the -chan/-kun suffix (as compared to the -sama suffix for Satsuki, which I use "Lady Satsuki" for), so it will remain Ryuuko-chan/Ryuuko-kun and the like.

The header about eggplants is a super roundabout way of saying "don't let yourself be taken advantage of".

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

秋茄子は嫁に食わすな。

(Don't let your daughter-in-law eat your autumn eggplants)

The mission carried out mere hours later required a level of secrecy that rivaled that of her former city-wide operation. That being said, only the head Nudists, the Elite Four, and herself knew about it. With the only way to break back into the metal fortress being through the cramped sewage access layered throughout the city and their only eyes being those of the few remaining cameras mounted within the complex, slipping back into the academy was easier said than done. Complicating matters was the numerous amounts of explosives lining the inner structures, rigged to blow once the signal keeping them disarmed. Once a fall-back measure should the worst come to happen, it was now far more than an unsightly thorn in their sides. Hidden in almost every nook and cranny, it was always a dicey gamble with their lives wagered every time a visible charge reared its ugly head.

“You should be fine,” Houka had soothingly reassured them from his position aboard the Naked Sol. “They shouldn’t detonate if you enter their sensor range. With any luck, the activators haven’t tripped yet. ...Hopefully. I’ll see if I can get back into the system from here. Try not to touch the white packets in the meantime. They will explode, and so will you.”

Emerging from the sewage-laced depths and into the safer haven of the thankfully COVERS-free maintenance tunnel, they slunk deeper into the heart of enemy territory. Truly, the master key proved invaluable, the skeleton key eliminating any need to noisily kick down the doors

and alert any roaming sentries. Apparently, Ragyou and Nui had become paranoid, turning the academy's defenses against them- sensitive doors rigged to trigger a complex-wide alarm when accessed illegally were still primed and ready to go; it was only through this small metal object that they were able to bypass them. With the blue-haired deva acting as their satellite eyes and ears, they stealthed the empty corridors- ghosts skulking their old haunts once more.

Left. Right. Right. Left. Sprint up three flights up stairs and crawl through an elevator shaft, and there it was- the third kamui in the making. And with it, the horde of attending sewing club members attending to its completion. Their brains are visible against the backdrop of ghastly white, bound tightly with life fibers. Satsuki feels only the smallest stab of pity for them- allowing herself to feel anything more would prove a fatal distraction in the larger scope of things.

Sanageyama moves next to her, and she nods, allowing him to hang back and alert her to any surprise attacks from behind. With Nonon and Ira waiting outside the heavily protected walls for as backup, their footsteps went undetected as they crept closer- as whisper quiet like ninjas in socks tiptoeing on thick plush carpeting

Bakuzan Gako flashes and sings as it whistles through the air, and the tear of fabric soon accompanies it. The small dagger and the clawed-blade of Uzu's Nudist Beach weapon work in tandem, making quick work of both the god robe and of the brainwashed fools that dared to attack them in retaliation. Metal plates fall as their threaded supports collapse, each one as large as a one-story building, collapsing onto the thick concrete flooring below.

At its fall, dozens of heads outside of the small circle of already-defeated students whip in their direction, their feet shuffling their doomed beings to the pair. Nui stumbles into the room with a small entourage of human-less COVERS, having been alerted by the sound of screaming seamwork, and shrieks angrily upon seeing the destruction snaking down the entire length of the gown. She becomes a tornado of orchard and gold, fury feeding her and making it difficult for even an experienced fighter like Satsuki to keep up with her. Her weapon whips out, managing to glance a hit on a shoulder as the ex-President leaps away, if only a little too late. Satsuki hisses as the tip cuts through muscle, and the Grand Couturier laughs sadistically, bouncing on her heels and clapping her hands at the sight.

"Pretty! So pretty! You'll look so beautiful when you're bleeding to death!"

She dives in again when the ebony-haired woman's attention is diverted for that tiniest of instances, letting the scissor bite and tear through muscle and flesh again and again. Satsuki calls out the green-haired deva's name as the first blow hits. Harime's fifth strike is parried away, and Satsuki retaliates to drive her further away as she leaps back to her elite. Neatly slashing through an approaching COVER, she shouts out his name once more.

"Uzu! Tactical retreat!"

He kicks away a mind-stitched student, deftly springing off another to land at her side, curved claw-sword at the ready.

They flee- not from the way they came, but through the suspiciously-Ryuuko shaped hole in the ceiling- using the remaining metal supports that tethered the unfinished kamui in place. They ascend, slicing through the remaining fibrous supports as they do so, and feel more than a small ripple of satisfaction upon watching the massive, ragged cloth collapse to the floor below. Nui tails them, her harpie-like cries grating painfully against eardrums.

Aikuro is waiting for them near the apex, having heard the fighting through the commsys, patiently hovering above the academy's pinnacle with a ladder already deployed. Uzu boosts his lady with hands atop each other, sending her soaring towards the armed chopper, following after not a second later. For the briefest of minutes, they hang in the air, weightless and only aware of the hovering vehicle that was their godsend out of there. Time slows to a crawl. They can see everything. Mikisugi, with his hair softly fluttering in the wind, shouting instructions to the pilot. The rotation of each blade, moving slowly, as if trying to whip through caramel. The rope ladder dangling before them now.

Then it is gone, and a heavy weight rests squarely on their bodies, bringing them crashing to the ground like Icarus to the sea.

“Go!” Satsuki shouts as she falls, twisting to escape the Grand Couturier's hold, and he nods, deftly steering the helicopter away and towards their fallback position.

Uzu had already escaped, landing in a cat-crouch in the arena encircled by the massive walls below. Within seconds, he is all but engulfed by white suited COVERS, their beings hungry for his own and tearing at him with their sleeves. They are unsuccessful in their attempts, however, as their lack of defenses proves their inferiority to the green weapon the monkey deva wielded. Nui stands before her now, blocking their way out the star-shaped slanted slit that served as a dual entry and exit. Satsuki stands straight and resolute, not yet ripping the pin off Senketsu's seki tekko, instead watching her carefully.

Nui stands bowed, haggard as she grips her scissor half with both hands. Her chest is heaving with breath, as if air could not help but want to escape the oppressive confines of her lungs by any means possible. She does not think to retreat back and protect the damaged god robe in case more assailants would emerge to further harm it while her back was turned. All she thinks about is goring the woman standing before her. If there was one thing Satsuki knew about Nui, it was that a single surefire tactic that would work against her every time- infuriation. With their luck, her mental instability would cause her to be locked in tunnel-vision. Enrage her, and let her resulting lack of attention do the rest.

She smirks, sensing victory at hand.

“You *still* have that scissor sword? Why not trade with Matoi for her Bakuzan half and defeat me with my own weapon, if she has truly gone over to your cause mind, body, and soul? Such things would have been fitting for someone of your caliber, Harime Nui!”

Her voice drops to an almost-whisper, letting the sneer plastered plain as day on her face work its magic.

“Or is it because you fear her? Harbor some doubts? Uncertain of how strong the mind-stitching you performed on Matoi will last, after she's proven that she can break free of its

hold and-?

She is cut off by a savage shoulder check. The cold steel-like sensation of the scissor sword snakes between her breasts, and she quickly moves, knocking the blade away to protect Senketsu. The edge, however, catches against her side as her opponent jerks it back, and slices clean through it, cutting almost to the bone.

“You’ve gone soft, **soft, SOFT**, Satsuki!” the blonde seamstress hisses, the lone blue orb rolling backwards in its socket as the visible sight of blood spilling down the other’s hip and dribbling down a thigh spurs her on. “You lie! Lie! **Lie!**”

Satsuki grimaces the slightest bit in pain, but does not otherwise react. Instead, she focuses on the blonde’s growing instability, and the thought brings yet another small smile to her face.

“But isn't the truth that the magnitude of its power is unmatched? *It is* the ultimate weapon to fight against the life fibers, is it not? And when used in conjunction with each other, they have the power to permanently kill off life fiber constructs- including you- correct? The only reason you haven't given her that scissor sword is because you still doubt her, deep down, no matter how you bury it! You still question where her loyalties lie!” she declares triumphantly, bracing her small sword against the scissor half when the latter swipes at her. “And it is because of this reason that we *know* that we can free Matoi! Our victory lies in that uncertainty!”

“Shut up, shut up, **SHUT UP!**” she shrieks, letting the arc of purple whip around her body and catch the heiress by her injured abdomen and flinging her back quite a ways away.

She creeps closer with her blade half held aloft, letting a shark-like slasher smile peel her lips back to reveal sharp, jagged teeth. “I’m gonna cut you up, Satsuki. I’m gonna chop you into a thousand tiny pieces and-”

And, almost as a response, the ground shakes tremendously as a great explosion rocks the entire island. One by one, charges detonate under Houka’s command, shattering the earth beneath them and forcing the tailor to hastily back away.

A rolling cloud of brown and dusk gray roll towards them like an avalanche, its massive size rivaling that of the tower which the ex-President had once used as her perch. Nonon and Ira emerge from its cover like tigers pouncing for the kill, clawed weapons glinting cruelly in the pale light and heavy-duty rocket launchers strapped to their back. Like clockwork, they work in tandem, backs pressing against each other as they painted the skies with red rent fibers, freeing Uzu from his clothly burden and allowing him to join their group.

“Lady Satsuki!” Gamagoori rumbles, protectively sandwiching her between his and the pinkette’s body. “Our evacuation is waiting! We'll cover you!”

The ebony haired woman nodded decisively, launching herself backward and using her heel to knock the offensive piece of clothing into Sanageyama’s waiting blade. She flips, spinning on a palm and letting inertia and the perfect arc of her jutting foot to do the same to its brethren.

“Acknowledged.”

“You’re not escaping this time, Satsuki,” the blonde jeers, swatting away the striking council chairperson with one swipe of her scissor blade.

She sneers as he is left sprawled along the ground- an easy kill. Death’s purple scythe, however, is stopped by an equally forceful pushback from pink and yellow, both shouting again for their leader to quickly flee by any means necessary. Nui’s singular deep blue eye shrinks, and she giggles manically, sweeping an arm towards the three devas. Instantly, a whirlwind of carnation pink and ivory white swirl about them, forming into similarly grinning cloth copies of the lolita, each one of them perfectly mirroring their creator.

“Mon mignon prêt-à-porter!” Nui happily cheers, stealthily slipping into the crowd amidst ample confusion and all but effectively vanishing from sight. “Gosh, you’re all so serious. I *told* you guys to lighten up! You just might *die* of a heart attack one day if you don’t learn to live a little. Anyway, have fun~! Toodles!”

Nonon swears and mounts a short attack on the freakishly joyful clones, her rocket launcher emitting hot streams of smoke as it spits fire and rains destruction with its fuel-powered payloads. Gamagoori tosses the green-haired companion a small uzi-like weapon, already drawing his akimbo ‘guns’ and chewing through their needle-reserves like crazy as more detonations fill the air, courtesy of the blue-haired deva’s careful intervention.

Satsuki slips past the main entrance to the institution, adding this to the list of instances she could never hope to repay her beloved four for. She pushes herself through the streets, adamant she will train to ignore the shotgun blast going off in her core every time she moves and the lactic acid eating away at her muscles and setting fire to her veins. Her destination, so close and yet so far, would be the place where her imminent rescue awaited; the same place that was designated as their drop spot was also her ticket to exfiltrate the hot zone.

A buzzing drone soon catches her attention. Satsuki looks up and curses under her breath, seeing the beleaguered aircraft flee the island overhead, hovering suits chasing after it and resisting all attempts by the machine gunner in its insides to scare them away. Aikuro soon shouts into her commsys a confirmation of what she saw, promising to come back for her and the elites once he managed to lose them and refuel.

Harime, for her part, shrieks and attempts to chase the Kiryuuin heiress through the streets of the two-star village upon sighting her prey once more, madly charging with no thoughts other than to gore this pest and leave her entrails for the circling birds to feast upon. Her sword-wielding arm swings wildly, and the unleashed chaos of a thousand typhoons erupting behind her as a result seems to spur her on, make her more bloodthirsty.

She is fast, coming in for repeated and sustained attacks. Satsuki lets her strike at her if only to keep the girl-thing’s sole focus on her, but does not yet falter, does not crumple to the ground and let death take her so easily. Her blade flicks out instinctively, but the small dagger can only do so much before it slips and allows flashes of purple to mar unblemished skin. Her injuries tear even more in her refusal to slow down, and rivulets of blood spill easily from re-opened wounds, leaving a dotted trail of bloody red behind her. Harime’s birth-given

unnatural speed thanks to her fiber-augmented body is on full display; asphalt rends itself to make way for her as she speeds on by, a trailing particle effect of bright whitish yellow barely managing to follow behind her bloodthirsty form.

Reality seems to bend at her will, allowing the furious bundle of carnation pink and wheat yellow to gain ground. But Satsuki is even faster, especially as she tears off the red pin with her teeth and allows the dark kamui to form around her body once more, rounding a series of sharp corners. Harime's speed is outmatched by Satsuki's intuitive knowledge of the surrounding land, allowing her to easily leap onto surrounding buildings and dive into covered area as she passes while Nui can only chase her in straight lines, using bursts of motion and her bladed weapon to flatten that which lay before her. By the time she reaches halfway-down the island, the blonde has all but lost sight of her, allowing the ex-President to slip into a familiar alleyway and snatch up the soiled white cloak where it lay next to an open manhole. With one fluid motion, she unfolds it, dislodging the yellow, half-frozen fruits from its inner pocket all the while. As she watches them tumble about, a plan comes to mind and she slips back into the shadows, breath hitched and body pressed against a fancy brick siding.

"Holding her off any longer isn't a viable option," she quietly pants, breath hitching as the blonde's familiar pigtails momentarily float into view before whipping back out again. "I can only distract her for so long before she catches on and returns to assault the others. Escape by helicopter is not yet obtainable. I don't know if Ryuuko will come to us again, especially after the course of the past few days. She just may be the only thing we can rely on as of now."

"Surely she must have *felt* it," Senketsu counters as their synchronization winks out-something the kamui initiated over concern for her declining health. "She had successfully responded when we did it before. And once she has learned of the situation, surely her curiosity will get the better of her and force her to investigate."

Satsuki nods, all too aware of the god robe's apparent sensitivity to her thoughts and her current strength- or lack of thereof.

"Hold her off it is, then. We can't sneak by her- at least, not through the way we entered anyway, thanks to the the demolition." she peeks around the corner, immediately retracting her head back under cover afterward with a quiet swear. "She's on a hill now. She'll be able to spot us if we move."

Senketsu squeezed her bust reassuringly as she draws breath deeply, and she steps out into the light, letting her boots slosh the dirty snow below. "Harime Nui!" she booms, and the blonde's head whips towards her instantly. Murderously. Gleefully.

She charges, speeding towards the two as they stand their ground, the heiress holding something behind her back. A mass of fabric flies towards her just before she reaches them, and she instinctively reacts by whipping her sword out, hoping it slices through both the small distraction and her actual target. The whipping purple slash cleanly cleaves through the richly furred piece like chainsaws through twigs, only to find that her target no longer there.

Nui shouts the elder god-woman's name once, then twice in frustration, head whipping to and fro in her mad desire to root them out.

And when nobody comes, she bends at the waist and examines the pieces of fallen cloth, noting with great interest its texture and the eerily similar cherry pink stitching of her name that served as the cloak's inner borders and seams. Her singular eye narrows suspiciously.

Why did she have possession of her cloak?

And then, it hits her.

The ashes and scrapes. The unexplained bursts of murderous rage and violent destruction of the nearest throwable objects in the area. Her impatience at staying in one place for long, always seemingly on the move. The reaction of pure terror upon waking up on her lap a few days before. The withdrawn attitude of late and her beloved's inability to focus for more than a few seconds at a time. She quickly deduces the only possible outcome.

Satsuki hurt Ryuuko. *Her Ryuuko.*

That revelation is enough to send fire racing through her body and galvanize her limbs into action. She does not yet know what horrors that bitch inflicted on her to make her act this way. All she knows is that Satsuki. *Must. Pay.* The scissor blade flattened the area with one fell swoop, instantly razing the broad area in front of her to the ground in hopes it would reveal the *rat's* hiding spot.

Not there.

Furiously, she speeds down the winding street and rounds the corner of the miniature city, palms sweaty and breathing coming in shallow and fast. Her roar of anger, however, is cut short by the least likely thing she expected to encounter.

She screams as yellow liquid splashes into her one good eye. The yuzu fruits, now devoid of their acidic juice, connects with her face a moment later. Her eye is burning. It hurts as bad as when that filthy researcher had stolen one eye, and she'd be damned if she let Satsuki take the other one. Nui stumbles about, swinging blindly with her sword, all trace of her usual grace completely evaporated.

"Where are you!?" she howls into the void, batting at her face and swiping at the liquid with pink sleeves.

Slowly, painfully, she opens it again, only managing to lift her lids a fraction of a millimeter before the stinging sensation of a thousand wasps force it back closed again. Pseudo enamel cracking under the sheer crushing force her jaws provided, she called out into the empty space around her, wrists twitching and knees buckling.

"Where! Are! You !?"

A patter of feet off to the side answer her call.

There!

Satsuki spins neatly under Nui's uncharacteristically clumsy strike, ducking under the outstretched arm. Bakuzan Gako sings, and cleanly slices through its target once. Then twice.

At first, nothing happens. The blonde straightens up and starts to mock her, only to have the words die in her throat. Two arms fall to the ground, uselessly clattering against the ground below amid a torrent of high-pressure blood streaming from the shoulder stumps like a burst fire hydrant.

Rage instantly overtakes any miniscule lingering pretenses of calm. Against the pain- the agony so very much like a white-hot ice pick being jammed into that part of her body- she pries her eye open, the tiny blue speck furious and tiny amongst white sclera tainted with vibrant cherry. Nui screams as she headbutts Satsuki, solidly cracking her skull against the heiress' own and knocking her down. Glowing scarlet life fibers stream from the dismembered limbs on both ends, wriggling on the ground and coiling around the blonde's torso as they pull the fallen arms upward.

"I bet you think you're so smart, don't you, Satsuki?" Nui hissed, repeatedly driving her boots into the fallen ex-President's ribs with the force of a charging rhino as she furiously jams the severed arms against their stumps, the unnaturally rapid healing thanks to her life fibers already mending the wound.

Satsuki coughed, blood mixing with phlegm and frothy saliva. A river of red spilled onto the pavement below, forming a magnificent cape that encompassed her still, supine form and drained into rusting holes eaten into the ill-maintained street below.

"Are you resentful of me because I intentionally weakened Junketsu with chemicals and so made it a poor candidate for whatever she had planned? That I was chosen to be the host that would unlock your Shinra Kouketsu's power? Jealous that I would be closer to mother than you would have ever had? Such things are below you.

You forget, that I, Kiryuuin Satsuki, will not-!"

"Shut up," the one-eyed girl hisses angrily, digging her heels in deeper and relishing the barely restrained choked noise of agony that follows. **"Shut up shut up shut up!"** The boot cracks smartly against the fallen woman's forehead once, and then once more for good measure. Purple whips out in unrestrained anger and the resulting flash of energy cleaves roughly into the skyscraper building behind her. "Spewing such trash is unbecoming of you, Satsuki."

Another wave of purple joined the first. The fifty-story building began to crumble, its shadow growing long and encompassing the duo as disintegrating structural supports failed one right after the other.

"I'm gonna watch you die, Satsuki. I want to watch your body scatter in a billion itty bitty pieces, and I'm going to enjoy every second of it."

Satsuki smirked cockily as a flicker of movement far away caught her attention, even as her vision wavered at the edges and started to darken and the strange sensation of lightheadedness started to take over. Nui's one eye narrowed, the sadistically gleeful shine on her deep blue orb turning cold and piercing.

"What are *you* so happy about?"

She coughs, a breathy laugh managing to escape her battered ribs.

“It was a poor decision to underestimate me, Harime Nui. You failed to assess your opponent and surroundings properly. Now you will pay the price!”

The pink heel pushes against her throat, crushing her windpipe and making it impossible to breathe.

“Don’t get so confident, *cherie*. Not when you’re about to have your pretty little insides spilled all over the floor. But, you know, that smirk an ugly look for you.” Her jaw practically split apart as she raised the purple blade over her head again. “Here, let me fix it for you-permanently.”

“I don’t think so!”

Before the pink-clad blonde could fully process what she just said, a bolt of bluish white light blazed past, crashing into both of them and blowing them apart. She felt the blonde scrabbling back towards her, trying to kill her in the split second of time she had left, but Satsuki perfectly poises a leg and kicks it out with military precision, knocking her back and against the building. An instep whips out and guides the free-falling sword towards her, its rounded handle blazing a trail down a leg and into a waiting hand.

Satsuki grinned as Nui’s frustrated howls pierced the air like a thunderbolt while white clothed hands wrapped themselves about her midsection and hugged her against their owner. Behind them, the skyscraper finally acquaints itself with the ground, dropping more than a few thousand tons of weight upon the Lolita-clad seamstress on its way down. Driving winds blew past as she was carried away from sudden certain death, hands barely holding onto both her short and the newly-claimed purple scissor blades. She squeezes the rounded handle and tries to mimic the way she had always seen Ryuuko hold hers, attempting to will the sword to miniaturize. But it is deaf to her commands and stays locked in its full length, mockingly glimmering in its purple tinting all the while.

They were in the skies, touching the low-hanging clouds that overlooked the abandoned island city-state. Then they were falling, accelerating at dangerous speeds.

“Ryuuko...” she murmured, voluntarily going limp in her grasp as her vision spun twice over.

Ryuuko merely held on to her tighter before going into a downward spiral, corkscrewing and executing barely-controlled loops all the way as flak burst in the air around her. She roars as a green blur speeds by her, nearly clipping Junketsu’s eyes and smartly rapping against a leg on its way past. The devas, now having exhausted all other combatants in the area, had directed their ire towards that which held their dear leader.

“Call your nerd,” she grunts, suddenly leveling off to avoid contact with Nonon’s rockets, if only out of consideration for her unexpected passenger.

“I-”

“CALL YOUR NERD!”

She bellows into the black device clipped to her ear, voice hoarse and only slightly just discernible above the winds screaming by them. “Inumuta, hold your fire! Repeat, hold your fire!”

There is a small burst of static before his voice replies, accompanied by a cascade of keyboard clacks.

“Understood. They should hear this conversation as well. Tracking your position through your comm sys.”

“Tell him to tail us,” Ryuuko grunts, perfectly able to hear the exchange over the background noise thanks to her augmented senses. Satsuki feels her sister paw at her body briefly before letting the arm return to its former position. “And to bring any of those losers with medical experience. I dunno what she did to you, but you need help. Fucking shit...” she whisper-hissed the last part, securing the elder’s face against her armored breasts and digging her chin into the crown of the other’s head.

Satsuki passed on the message, feeling her insides do somersaults and cartwheels as Ryuuko dipped and twisted to avoid the COVERS in their path. Houka starts to respond, but anything of substance is cut off as a whistling missile grazes past them and explodes nearby, causing her not-entirely-unexpected kidnapper to double back and sharply shoot into the skies at a ninety degree angle.

They passed low-hanging clouds, streaking over the tops of skyscrapers as they absconded the island city-state completely. Satsuki mutely watched as copious amounts of her blood started to stain Junketsu’s front red, feeling as if her body was slowly turning to lead. It didn’t help when Ryuuko jerked to and fro as if desperately looking for something once they arrived in the general Toukyou area- as if she were painfully attuned to how Satsuki’s grip on this world was fading fast if she didn’t do something, even. Ryuuko dove down once more in her questing search. And, apparently finding that which she sought.

Then they were in the underground subway tunnels, shooting past train cars left to rot in the flooded system and kicking up the rancid liquid all the while. The deafening echoes of their blazingly fast travels roaring in her ears, coupled with the icy spray of murky water, felt as if she were caught in the midst of a tsunami wave crashing down. The winding tunnels seemed to go on forever, each station exit partially obstructed by the wastes left by humanity in the ensuing panic of the COVERS invasion or from squatters that had lived there previously. Anything that Ryuuko couldn’t dodge, she simply went through, relying on brute force to headbutt through concrete walls and thick steel slabs alike. Satsuki momentarily passes out for the briefest of moments when one such fragment conks against the back of her head, and when she comes to again, she knows that Ryuuko knows painfully too well what is going on.

“Hold on, hold on, dammit,” the brainwashed girl breathes into her ear, lightly shaking her in a futile bid to keep her awake.

But her resolve isn’t enough to power through the intense urge to sleep, to recover from the trauma she just experienced. She is fighting a losing battle, and she knows it. And so, she braces her purple scissor half against Ryuuko, wedging its horizontal form partially between her breasts and her sister’s clasped arms, and surrenders to the black tide, welcoming blissful

unconsciousness and placing calculated trust in her sister to not to do anything in the meantime.

They land perfectly in their destination- an intensive care unit ward- the white-clad woman firmly snapping onto the floor with a resounding ‘thud’ and a minor tremor that shakes the building to its foundations. Satsuki’s limp body is still cradled against her form, and she reluctantly pulls away from her bleeding body, letting the elder’s arms drop to her side.

“Kiryuuin,” she murmurs. “Kir-yuu-fucking-in,” Ryuuko hisses, eyes narrowing as she violently shakes the heiress’ body. “Wake up.”

But Satsuki is deaf to her calls, effectively dead to the world. All Ryuuko’s tantrum manages to do is make her loll her head to the side.

Ryuuko swears and ushers them into an empty patient room, where she unceremoniously dumps Satsuki to the floor and grabs the abandoned blankets lying atop the bed. She sinks her sharpened canines into the cheap linens and tugs a few times, rending the expansive white cloth into crude strips. The thought of finding a proper medical kit or supply eludes her, and she thinks only to first stop the bleeding before rooting around for supplies. Infections were to be worried over later. Right now, all that mattered is preserving the life of the last hope for humanity.

She continues her work until it is completed, sweating over anxiety and her labor. Then and only then does she truly notice her completely blood-splattered front, and the equally bloody Senketsu staring tiredly at her. As if on cue, the coppery scent invades her nostrils, clouds her mind and fills her vision with red. The life fibers within her sing, prodding her forward, to indulge and partake in the greatest pleasure they sought by default. The call is too strong for someone of considerable amounts of such materials within herself, and she is helpless to resist.

“Ryuuko,” Senketsu murmurs, but Ryuuko ignores the kamui as it continues to speak to her, too entranced by the siren’s call.

Tentatively, she lowers herself over the unconscious form of her sibling and laps at the spilled blood drying on her skin, cleaning the pale board from the red ink bestowed upon it before wrapping a blanket strip over the coagulating gashes. All she can think about is how good it tastes, and wonders why she hadn’t thought of doing this before. Almost instantly, Senketsu’s explicit consciousness is roused from dormancy, its being disoriented and angry as the blood-summons bring its demands to a head. It is a disgruntled pilot rousing from slumber, a driver annoyed when the automated guides fail to sufficiently negate the need for direct input. Its rabidity courses through Ryuuko’s nervous system, where they share their thoughts even without synchronicity within a tangled mass of neutral tissues.

“*Kill*,” the twisted mirror of her voice hissed from within, its aggressive urges, flashbulb bursts of cortisol, and intoxicatingly potent combinations of neurotransmitters skyrocketing exponentially with each passing second. White fabric soft as silk and divine as its namesake squeezes her athletic form, digging deeper and greedily drinking from the red well within. Blood beats in her ears, steady as a pounding drum as her heart throbs furiously. It is hard to think. “*Kill!*”

“La-!”

“Kill! Kill!” The kamui demanded, whipping into a frothing frenzy at the taste of its former wearer’s blood. *“Weak! Near death! Kill! Paint the walls with her blood! Leave her mangled corpse out for those weak humans to find, then murder them all right before each other’s eyes. Hit her! Strike her! Gouge her eyes out! Feast on her flesh! Devour her!”*

“Later,” Ryuuko grinned, mentally shooting a dismissive reply back as she continued to lap up the spilled liquid with wild abandon, making sure more of it seeped into the white cloth and watching, fascinated, as it rapidly disappeared and left the cloth as pure as snow once more. *“One must fatten up a calf before slaughter, after all.”*

The sticky red fills her senses, flooding her mouth with its metallic tang and beckoning her close. Unlike that of the filthy human she had tasted a few days prior, the Kiryuuin’s blood is sweet, enticing in its mere existence. She doesn’t notice Satsuki had regained consciousness in the meantime and is watching her until she lifts her head and peers from beneath the shaggy mane partially covering her eyes to discover dark blue ones. She scoops the last bit of blood from a forearm with a calculated flick of a serpentine tongue, suggestively moving it slowly across the sensitive regions of the other’s wrist in circular patterns, just to see if she could get a rise out of the other. It doesn’t work. Goosebumps rise as the organ swirls over the patch of skin, but never once did her steely façade crack.

Oh well. It was fun while it lasted. *‘Back to business,’* she supposes, popping her joints with a sigh.

“You have something that belongs to me,” she demands, towering over the still woman with the mere act of straightening her back.

“And you of mine,” she acknowledges through bloodied teeth. “I suppose it would be mutually beneficial if we... both returned what is rightfully ours.”

Ryuuko pauses. She blinks. Suddenly hyperaware of her actions, she wonders why else she cares so much about the woman before her, if for a reason other than the excuse she tells herself- that she was necessary only for her own plans and nothing more. She wonders why she doesn’t just knock the bitch out and take the opposing sword twins for her own and leave her completely defenseless now that help was signaled and was on its way.

Then she backs away the slightest bit and unbuckles the sword from the golden chain drawn taut against her hips, watching the Bakuzan blade clatter to the ground with feigned interest. She firmly steps on the hilt of the wakizashi, and for a moment, Satsuki thinks that she will raise her other foot and bring it crashing down on the blade itself, if just to mock her and symbolically declare her unparalleled ability to crush her aspirations underfoot. But then the heel grinds forward and the black sword is sent skittering to her side, where its impossibly sharp tip leaves faint gouges into the hospital’s vinyl tiling.

She is becoming delirious, Satsuki thinks, watching as the world spins about her for a long moment before righting once more as she returns the gesture.

“Hah,” the elder sibling grins, summoning the dying reserves of her strength and sliding the purple scissor sword to its rightful owner.

She watches as Ryuuko scoops it up, testing its feel within her hand. Like poison from an open wound, the vibrant violet is bled out, a cherry red wave blossoming from where Ryuuko held the handle and pushing the poisonous purple to the tip. Then, it is all gone, and much like its geminal twin, is nothing but the color of drying blood once more. Ryuuko murmurs in approval, easily enlarging its other half to its full length with naught but a casual wrist flick and the metallic scrapings of hidden machinations carrying out her will within the weapon. She beholds the lost scissor, gripping its circular handle almost reverently. She knows now the story behind it, and thinks only of the wish bestowed upon it to enact lethal revenge. The two halves, reunited once more, scrape against peeling ceiling tiles upon her inspection, easily matching their owner in size.

Satsuki wobbles as a new wave of exhaustion passes over her, more crushing than the last. Her resolve is iron and steel, reinforced concrete and military-grade armor. But the tsunami battering against her defenses now is corrosive in nature- something that she had yet to develop resistance to. Hydrofluoric acid, wearing away at the mountainous skyscraper she built up in her mind and eroding its sturdy foundations, perhaps.

The world is fading fast.

“Shit.” The brainwashed girl murmurs, darting forward to catch her fainting sibling before her head hits the ground.

Gently, with the careful nature she didn’t know she possessed, she sets Satsuki down, stiffening when she hears footsteps moving to their position not a moment later.

She stands over the limp body of her sister, aggressively pointing her blades at the intruders and bending at the knees at the slightest bit, ready to tear into the unfortunate people who had chosen to make this place their newest haunt. One dares to enter through the doorway slowly with arms placatingly raised over their head; the other remains behind, practically vibrating with barely concealed excitement. A few silent seconds passed. The atmosphere was oppressive, so much like a domed bubble of water about to spill over- surface tension at its finest. Nobody moved, waiting for the other side to engage first. Another second, and then...

“Mankanshoku Mako is on the case!”

Ryuuko stares at the resident nerd as he fully steps into the light with utter disbelief written on her face.

Mako flings herself at Ryuuko, disregarding the danger of the scissor swords and fully activated kamui she wears, and latches onto her front, fiercely clinging on despite the blue-haired Elite’s warnings. She thinks not of the certain death Ryuuko represents; if such a bloodthirsty person could put aside their hatred and rescue the life of their mortal enemy while endangering their own at the same time, how bad could they be? Houka sucks in his breath sharply as the no-star wraps her arms around the brainwashed teen’s torso and rests her legs on the tri-crowned points accentuating the taller girl’s upper thighs, seabreeze blue eyes trained upon the dual scarlet scissor blades held aloft in tensed hands. Ryuuko’s eye twitched,

body tensing in barely-held seething anger. The kamui itself bristles in anger, its low snarling roar inaudible but to she who wore its glory proudly. Her dull eyes twinkle with a mean intelligence deep within and promise unparalleled levels of pain. Joints snap and click into place as pressure that could have birthed diamonds ripples through lean muscle and stringy sinew. She thinks of the bloodshed sure to occur within a couple days, when Ragyou is dealt with and their help is no longer needed, barely restraining her body from instinctively tearing the poor unsuspecting girl apart. A throaty growl is all she can manage to output in the meantime, the cascade of conflicting feelings taking more than its fair share of a mental toll upon her.

Houka flinches inwardly, already sure that the contents of his bowels had voided themselves. He prepares for some sort of confrontation, already meaning to secure his Lady and abandon the scene once Ryuuko's wrathful attention was solely focused on the no-star, as cruel and selfish as it appeared. A thick bead of sweat gathered upon his forehead, setting itself upon his brows before leaving clear salty trails behind. Fingers twitched. A full fifteen seconds elapsed before something surprising happened- Ryuuko actually relaxed. Red pupils turn into tiny slits as she snarls out her displeasure, but nothing else happens otherwise.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Houka relaxes, letting out a breath he didn't even realize that he was holding in.

‘Ah. Nonviolent reaction. Displeased, perhaps, but not overly hostile. Self restraint displayed in the face of a medical emergency. Filing this fact away for later use.

Lady Satsuki on the ground. Bloody, but bandaged. Appears stable, but unconscious. Ripped sheets nearby, most likely the source of Lady Satsuki's impromptu bandages. Matoi's way of helping stem the bleeding? Could such a person truly understand the depths of their actions?

Matoi looking at me. Brow twitching. Appears as if agitation is rising. Must respond.’

He clears his throat, making an obvious effort to hide his nervousness from being around the second most powerful person on the planet.

“Yes, well, I thought it best to use someone who was more familiar with Lady Satsuki for this procedure and had no record of murdering their patients- intentionally or otherwise. Would you have preferred the lethal ineptitude of *Doctor* Mankanshoku, his bumbling idiot of a son with perverted streak, or this absent-minded fool?”

Ryuuko glared. A pause, and then a huffed “Whatever. Let’s just get this over with,” escaped grit teeth.

The scissors are reunited once more as her will forces them back down to naught but the width of a pointer finger, bound on separate chain links but close enough so that they tinkle lightly upon contact with every step she takes. She forces herself to relax enough to release the transformation and return back to normal in a small shower of sky blue stars a moment later, Mako jerking and shivering from her position as the utterly indescribable, weird feeling of transformation envelops her as much as it does with the chimera. Sensations like ghostly claws running up and down her spine greet her afterwards, the unnaturally frosty being of an

untransformed Ryuuko drastically different. Whereas a Ryuuko synchronized and overridden with the parasitic entity felt menacing in that one knew that danger was always lurking around the corner ready to pounce and rip her hapless prey to shreds, this Ryuuko felt colder, more calculating. She probably could talk and laugh about the most banal of topics one minute, and become a complete psychopath complete with evisceration fetish the next second. She shivers, burying her nose deeper into Ryuuko's flat stomach.

Houka meanwhile hurries over to his fallen commander. A grunted command is all that is needed for the two girls to assist him in moving Satsuki to a more proper location- a cleaner room, a room that showed less environmental damage than the rest of the ward and didn't look as if a mad biologist's playground had taken over and plastered several hundred types of bacteria all over the walls.

"Get me those blankets over there," he commands, bunching them into a wad and propping it under the ex-President's ankles after Ryuuko takes the opportunity to throw it at his face and knock his unusually-cut glasses askew.

"We need to hurry. Your previous assistance in tending to her injuries was most helpful, but that was only a stopgap solution. There's no telling if Lady Satsuki has lost enough blood for her wounds to become fatal. Good thing I downloaded this hospital's blueprints before I came here... hopefully they keep it up to date..."

Her adjusts his glasses and taps away at the PDA he somehow managed to extract from one of the many pouches the Nudist Beach "uniform" provided.

"We need to do a blood transfusion. I will need to retrieve the proper equipment to do so. Mankanshoku."

"Behh!?!"

"You're with me."

He turns and affixes Ryuuko with an unrelenting stare, pointedly ignoring the resulting typhoon of excited questions from the brunette.

"I trust you two won't attempt to... repaint these walls in a stunning shade of carmine while we are away?"

Ryuuko just stares at him impassively. Then she smiles and utters her next sentence sweetly, each honey-covered word barely concealing a promise of a painful death.

"If I choose to redecorate, it will be in the *lovely* shade your blood specifically provides."

"Hilarious," he monotonously replies as he turns and leaves, the eldest Mankanshoku sibling trailing behind.

"We're looking for the packets they use for blood donations," he explains as they descend, running all the while into countless rooms, always spending no more than a couple of hurried seconds rummaging around before moving onto the next one. "They should have similar

materials used for blood transfusions nearby, if my basic understanding of hospitals is correct. Otherwise, we most likely will have to head for the spare storage rooms.”

They pass by a hospital room intended to be shared by two patients, and Mako curiously peeks in when something lying on the bed catches her eye. It is a oblong lump, varying in height in areas, and covered reverently with a white blanket even as insects and rot ate away at it. She realizes a second later as she speeds down the hall that it bore the shape of a human, and she shivers unconsciously, forcing herself to move faster. The thought of Ryuuko being in that person’s position- covered with a blanket and left as food for the forces of nature- frightens her more than anything else, and even though her legs scream, she pushes on forward.

“We must hurry! Ryuuko-chan and Lady Satsuki are counting on us! We can’t let them down, nope, nope, nope! We have to hurry! They’re counting on us and we can’t let them down! Oh, oh, oh! We can probably ask my dad! He knows a lot of things on how to steal blood from other people, so maybe-”

Houka skids to a stop, effectively stopping the gushing fire hydrant of Mankanshoku-brand word salad when she crashes into his back.

“Eh?”

Mako instantly gets into his face, easily looking down upon him with the unsteady assortment of boxes she had chosen to mount herself atop of. “Don’t you remember? When people die from blood loss, it means they die!”

“It’s not as simple as that, Mankanshoku,” Inumuta replies, unzipping his collar to speak clearly with one hand and using the other to nudge her out of the way. “Lady Satsuki needs a blood transfusion. However, the usual methods of using already available blood are... inaccessible to us now. Whatever blood has been stored here is absolutely useless. Not only has the frozen storage units that would preserve the blood been taken offline with the knockout of electricity, all stored blood has expired. The only sources of fresh, *available* blood Lady Satsuki has at this moment is you, Ryuuko, and I. Both of our blood types are incompatible with Lady Satsuki- yours is B, and mine is AB. We simply would kill her if we tried to donate.”

Mako shakes her head in furious agreement; it is all but a brown blur at this point. “My dad knows the best way to transfuse blood! More people have been killed by the procedure than have been saved by it!”

Houka stares at her for a good long minute, trying to ascertain if the coconut-haired girl was joking. It takes him more than a few seconds after getting over the initial shock to realize she is being genuinely sincere.

“*Anyway*,” he sighs, snapping on fresh gloves, retrieving the bountiful rewards in his search for sterile supplies, and sharing his burden with the no-star as they trek back to the Kiryuuin siblings. “This shouldn’t be too difficult. I’ve ran scans on Matoi when we were matched against each other during the Naturals Elections. Matoi *also* does not possess the same blood type as Lady Satsuki. However, since hers is that of a quasi-universal donor group, there

shouldn't be any complications whatsoever- barring those that would happen if there were indeed life fibers in her blood. Since Lady Satsuki possesses A+-typed blood, theoretically, there shouldn't be a reaction between both of them."

The small pile of medical equipment tumbles onto a bed, joining the small medley of bandages and gauze and nurse's tape. Houka sighs in satisfaction as he rearranges the room's furniture with the former no-star's help to his liking. The room they chose additionally had several strange-looking machines already present against the walls, gray and bulky in appearance, and both former students pant and grunt as they move the heavy machinery into place near the chosen setup. Houka wipes his brow, unhappy with the copious amounts of sweat trailing down his face.

"Mankanshoku, please retrieve Lady Satsuki and Matoi while I try to activate the backup generators, please. Hopefully the fuel reserves haven't been depleted yet."

Mako leaves in a broad brown blur, footsteps echoing in the empty space like a herd of stampeding elephants. She comes rushing back not a moment later, Ryuuko trailing behind at a leisurely walking pace. In her arms, Satsuki is nestled against her, both twin Bakuzan blades resting perfectly atop her curled form, crossed against each other as their flats rest against her dipped abdomen. Silently, she places her atop one bed, propping herself in another nearby and repeatedly ignoring Mako's attempts at garnering her attention until Houka successfully returns from his journey. He explains the procedure to her and approximately how long it will take, and she cuts him off mid-sentence impatiently, irritably waving him to go ahead.

The rest of the set-up goes relatively smoothly, with Inumuta constantly calling up anatomical references on his PDA while swabbing them with rust-colored disinfectant and sticking sterile needles into their veins- albeit with more than a few tries and a litany of inventive swears from the brainwashed girl that could rival those of a sailor. At one point, he had completely missed the median cubital vein completely and had to move the needle while it was still under her skin, searching for the highway of life and life-blood. Ryuuko had kicked an old food tray in her enraged thrashing, sending the gray platter soaring in the air and thoroughly embedding itself in the patterned ceiling. Contrary to what she had claimed when they first started the set-up, it turned out that Ryuuko did need Mako's help after all; the shorter girl proved herself invaluable many times over with her talent in calming the delinquent just enough so that she wouldn't murder him and turn his body into her latest grotesque work of art- at least, not yet, anyway. The river of red flows from the younger sibling, through the machine, and into Satsuki's unconscious form. The large needles nestled within feel odd but not quite uncomfortable to her, and the feeling of ichor being sucked from her is hard to describe. The sensation is almost freakish, how she can feel her body's warmth outside of her body, trapped within semi-transparent tubing. The dark red liquid is very much unlike the bright scarlet ones she had seen often when slicing people apart, and it fascinates her. Like a child, she reaches up to where her blood is being collected for the short period of time before it was to be infused with Satsuki's own, marvelling at the strangeness of being able to play with her own bagged blood as if it were another toy.

They had a machine; they had several, actually. One of them was linked to both siblings by large needles like the fangs of a cobra, biting deep into veins and sliding down the well of

time and sucking up the old water and old bitterness gathered there and bleeding it into the recipient. Did it remove the poisons accumulated over long years? It fed in near-silence, the dead air punctuated with small ticking noises and the occasional monotonous beep. Click, click, click. A quarter of a pint gone. Two and a half minutes' worth of silence stretched into that of fifteen, then twenty, then thirty. Click, click, click... Yet another quarter-pint gone. One chunk of her life wasted down the drain just waiting for this to be over. She wonders if mother even cares about her anymore or even had done so within her relatively short life... ...Not like she had sent an army to fetch her at any point in time, anyway.

The other devices were just measures of precaution- white devices with a small laser within clipped to their pointer fingers. Lime green lines bounced along darker forest green backgrounds in time with their heartbeat, a jostling rectangle that varied lengths quite constantly matching the rhythm underneath a set of numbers that also seemed to fluctuate, if only less so. Those digit pairs monotonously spat out minute changes in life and life-blood, of the very determination that swelled their veins and sped through their heart like clockwork.

She wonders why she's thinking about all of this. She attributes it to the blood loss. She says. Thinks. Believes, even if futilely so, once again forcing false impressions upon her psyche to avoid thinking that she was sparing the life of her alleged father's killer for any other other reason than to ensure that her pawns remain on the chessboard.

Her thoughts are interrupted at Inumuta's bored voice informing her that output pressure on her end is dropping and reminding her to keep clenching and unclenching her fist. She moves her fingers into an obscene gesture instead, flashing her sharpened fangs for added effect. He ignores it and instead makes a noise of approval, keeping his eyes trained on the monitors that dictated their fate.

"Good, good. Flow rate is climbing back up."

She gives him a mischievous grin and lets the mostly-curved hand bounce on the bed, occasionally twirling the lone finger in a circular motion. Houka catches the action in his peripheral vision and isn't amused. His frown deepens as she lets another finger quirk upward, then another.

Mako gets in her face right away, already preparing an admonishment. Ryuuko manages an innocent façade as the short girl continues to lecture her, inhaling greedily when she *finally* moves out of her breathing space.

"Hey, nerd."

Mako shoots her a disapproving look. Ryuuko doesn't care, and sneers at her efforts to get her to cooperate.

"How big are these needles, by the way?"

A pause. And then, "17 gauge. At least, I think so."

“You know what would be a fun thing to do right now? I could stick them in your eye. Or I can work on my acupuncture skills- using swords to do it is no fun when all your patients keep dying in a bloody mess. So unsatisfying.”

“Mm...” he hums, pursing his lips, and says nothing more.

Mako waits at Ryuuko’s side, standing, for a few tense seconds. She waits for the inevitable explosion of energy, of rage that Ryuuko would exhibit, and steels herself for its appearance. However, to her surprise, it failed to materialize. Without the welcome distraction of harassing Honnouji’s resident technological expert and practically locked in place by virtue of “feeding” her blood sibling, the only thing Ryuuko can do is count the monotonous clicking and try to determine when nerd-boy over there would finally disconnect her. She twitches in anticipation, waiting for it to be over so she can get on with her life, so that they can go back to hating each other and trying to tear each other to pieces.

Click. Click. Click.

Fifteen more minutes. Another quarter pint of her life pumped into her arch nemesis.

Click. Click. Click.

One hour down.

Click. Click. A thousand clicks, and then a thousand more.

Two hours down.

Click.

The sun stretches across the sky, still lazily moving across its celestial path. Ugh, when was this going to be over?

Click...

Wasn't this enough blood?

Click click...

How much blood did this bitch need anyway? It’s not like we don’t spill like a thousand gallons every time we fight, anyway. Hell, we could have even painted the entire damn school with just one battle.

Click. Click. Click...

Wait...

Click. **Click.**

Didn't she give more than two pints already?

Click...

Were they intending to kill her to save Satsuki in her place? Were they intending to drain her dry?!?!

Click.

She knew it. She fucking knew it, and yet she foolishly believed that they would continue to act like the simpletons they were and let her go in their incompetence. A panic seizes her chest, spreading to the rest of her limbs. How many pints had they drawn out already? How long had they had this thing attached to her? How long!?

Drunkenly, she thrashes, casting aside the ratty off-white sheets that cover her shaking form. Immediately, Mako rises from her place beside her best friend, shouting words of encouragement and comfort. It doesn't work.

Ryuuko continues to violently shake, high-pitched whines escaping her clenched teeth. Forsaking instincts screaming in her mind that this wasn't the Ryuuko she remembered and throwing all caution to the wind, the no-star student clambers onto the bed, straddling Ryuuko's form. She embraces her front, burying her face in the brainwashed teen's breasts, letting the other's uniform soak in her tears.

"Ryuuko-chan... Ryuuko-chan!"

Two meters away, Satsuki's brows twitch. She stirs. She winces in pain as she moves the arm containing the gemini needle breathing new life into her far too quickly and accidentally sends her twin swords spilling over her sides and off the bed. She blinks owlishly in confusion as she feels the strange sensation of a warm concentrated weight upon her, snaking down a wrist. She slowly slides up on her bed and takes in the sight before her- the flailing Ryuuko, the equally panicking Mako, the now-shouting Houka, and the machines that connected her to her sibling.

"Houka," she manages to hoarsely speak, and the Elite immediately swivels on a heel to face her, already about to apologize. "Houka," she interrupts, "I need you to control her. Sedate her if you must. She will undoubtedly injure herself if she continues like this."

Houka's attention immediately returns to his device, where he furiously wades through the archived databases indexed within the PDA- there was no such thing as a stable internet connection now that servers worldwide were downed without humans maintaining them, and it couldn't hurt to have a hundred books' worth of medical information. He consults the virtual library, wading through the digital sea of information as he hastily flips through countless pages of drugs and their effects, occasionally cross-checking medical combinations even though he knows his patient's high-invulnerability. Finally, he gives up on a complex solution and settles for the first thing that came to mind, grunting in irritation and mentally cursing himself for not organizing this information's sector earlier.

"Mankanshoku," he stars, and the said no-star perks up, accidentally releasing Ryuuko in the process, letting her fall in a messy heap upon her bed and momentarily stunning her. "You're looking for a... monohydroxybenzoic acid."

Mako immediately straightens up and salutes with a sharp arm slapping across her chest, bounding away to pillage the destroyed remains.

“I got it!”

Houka looks up from the screen just in time to see black straps of the younger girl’s Nudist Beach uniform melt into the darkness. Grumbling, he flips through another selected indexes before the digital page brought before him makes him stop in his tracks. He had noticed his mistake too late. He re-reads the chunk of text once more, and his eyes bulge as he realizes that he had unfortunately clicked the wrong link.

“Wait, Mankanshoku!”

But there was no circumventing the girl’s selective hearing, nor was there a way to stop a fiercely determined girl with a goal in reach.

There is soon a horrible crashing sound in the room next door, and then a brown blur as she returned at lightning-speed. Her limbs are an indistinct wave of constant motion as she rips open boxes and pill bottles and shoves their contents into Ryuuko’s mouth before she can even protest. The hybrid chokes and coughs, but the underachiever manages to clamp her mouth shut with both hands, forcing her to swallow and taking advantage of her apparent hesitation to do anything but try to push her away. The cycle of resisting and forced-feeding repeats itself twice more before Ryuuko collapses back panting, spent and unwilling to continue fighting.

Cautiously, Mako sidles up next to her, unaware of the gazes of the two former student council members upon her. A white-clad arm reaches out, fingers searching and extending towards the no-star as its master starts to tire. Thankfully, the delinquent doesn’t do anything, merely threading a hand through her hair and letting her hand rest within the mass of brown. The three collectively breathe a muted sigh of relief. Mako instinctively draws closer, and Ryuuko hums approvingly, soon drifting off to sleep.

Houka sighs in relief and silently tends to his superior’s wounds after stopping the blood transfusion machine and disconnecting both siblings, frowning at the many deep wounds and polished shards of debris that had embedded themselves into her skin. In certain areas of her body, it almost looked as if she were part of a glass mosaic. Time passes as he re-does the medical treatment the chimers had done previously, this time properly sanitizing the wounds and closing them shut once more. Before he knows it, over one hour has passed.

It was not long before the temporary peace was disturbed, however. Veins sloshing with poisoned blood and fibers working overtime to save their host from a drug-induced never-ending sleep, a curious thing happened.

Ryuuko stirred.

Instantly, three bodies in the room froze in place, necks slowly craning in her direction.

She twitched.

They braced themselves and prepared for the worst.

She woke.

Her eyes slowly roved around the room, taking in the curious stares of three pairs of eyes. She stares at them right back, head bobbing the slightest bit from the remaining wooziness.

She screamed.

“Get down!”

Houka dodges as a chair sails through the air and crashes against a wall, easily breaking through plaster and drywall like buckshot through wet paper. His darting arm soon brings the coconut-haired girl to the floor with him, and she tumbles to his side, visibly disoriented.

“What did you give her!?” he shouts at the no-star from his cowering position underneath Satsuki’s bed.

“This!” She produces one of many pink cardboard boxes and white plastic containers that held tablets mere hours ago out of nowhere and all but shoves it into the blue-haired deva’s hands.

He inspects the boxes and fallen pill bottles and their accompanying tablet-holders- torn aluminum backings, plastic molding, and all. His expression drops and face pales considerably as he finally spots the chemical’s true name in the sea of miniature text. When he finally is able to speak, it is only in short sentences, heavily laced in stunned disbelief.

“Entire cases.”

“Mmhm!”

“Of Diphenhydramine.”

“Yup!”

“Get it off,” Ryuuko hissed, thrashing on the medical bed and swatting herself madly in the background. “Get them all off.”

She started tugging at the kamui, ranting and raving about the crawling feeling of insects upon her in shouted, near-incomprehensible half-sentences. It is by sheer luck that she does not think to rip the IV off in her thrashing, instead only getting tangled in the tubing. Mako re-launches herself at the raging teen in hopes that her presence will serve as a buffer between her best friend and the madness that threatens to consume her from within. Nails dig deep into white fabric as the no-star student clings desperately, for life, for love, and for the family she very nearly lost many times over.

With the delinquent's destructive focus elsewhere, Inumuta takes off, immediately making a beeline to search for the hospital pharmacy- or any storage of drugs, for that matter. He is panting as he practically crashes into room after room, using any means necessary to break

into the medicine cabinets. With desperate prying fingers, he pulls each one of their doors open, letting bottles spill and crash onto the ruined tiling in his furious search.

Satsuki staggers to her feet, clinging onto the ivory railing with whitened knuckles and swathed in the threadbare white hospital blanket Inumuta had so thoughtfully provided during the transfusion. She grits her teeth and shakily makes her way over to the struggling pair, tripping over herself like a newborn fawn. Ryuuko snarls and viciously snaps her hips to the side, easily dislodging Mako's hold despite the shorter girl's inhuman strength and sending her skidding across the floor. The brunette gives a short squawk of surprise as she tumbles about. Even as her vision spins, she can see the former President rising from the floor as the latter falls yet again, carefully moving between the girl and her target in a bid to stop her.

The sound of her approach catches her attention, and she turns her head slightly to acknowledge her presence, throat rippling with a warning growl. Undeterred, she presses forward, lips pursed in a perma-frown.

Only one thing is on her mind- distract Ryuuko.

She collapses partially once she reaches the other's bed, knees buckling beneath and arms fiercely gripping the clothed gurney's edge.

"Matoi."

Ryuuko laughs. It is mad, as insane as the kamui wearer herself, loud and unsettling as the sensation of nails on a chalkboard. Even Junketsu seems affected, the normally stoic "pupils" decorating golden yellow cloth now shrunken and twitching erratically. She sways drunkenly, legs bowed and crooked as she tries to heave herself up from her hunched position. Her smile only grows wider as Satsuki continues to draw even closer.

Fingers twitch, suddenly whipping through the air and seizing the red lapels of the dark kamui. The taller of the two's eyebrows are instantly brought close together at such an act, furrowed in consternation. This does nothing but amuse the younger, earning a muted guffaw.

"Do you know what it felt like when I stumbled upon a horde of worthless pigs in human clothing that thought their measly bullets and grenades could stop Junketsu and the life fibers' cause? Do you know what they said as I started to crush their allies right in front of them underfoot and carve them up like the walking sacks of pig-flesh they are?"

"Matoi!"

"Mercy!" she shrieks, mad with laughter as if this were all a joke. "Mercy! They begged-begged!- for mercy! 'Please, please have mercy!' they cried as their blood watered the ground below. And I told them- I said," she fists the rough red material and yanks her sister forward so that their faces almost touch. Her voice drops low, littered with more than a hint of cruel amusement. "'I've run out of mercy.'"

She releases the neatly tied knot and throws her head back as another round of insane cackling overwhelms her. Mako immediately jumps to Satsuki's aid in the only way she feels

she knows how- embracing Ryuuko from behind and resisting all attempts by the other to dislodge her person. The brainwashed girl roars in choked anger and tries to fall on her back to get the short-haired no-star off, but Mako clings that much tighter, forcing the hybrid's upper half to still.

They tumble off the bed and roll onto the floor, where they lie in a sprawled, squirming mess. She thrashes-hard- undulating erratically in hopes of being freed from this impromptu prison. Her movements are sluggish, somewhat uncoordinated, and severely jerky. In between short, violent bouts of wriggling, her fingers claw at her own body. Like a fish caught in a net far above its oceanic home, she flails aimlessly, madly desperate just to get out of whatever hold they have put her in. But no matter how hard she struggles, how hard she rolls and jerks and screams and tries to shake her brown-haired captor off of her, she can't. She knows, almost intuitively, that deep down, she mustn't hurt her. That this girl was special. That she was irreplaceable. Taking advantage of this restraint, Satsuki soon slips into Mako's place, wrangling limbs and dodging the cruel flash of sharpened enamel as jaws sink into nothing but air. The coconut-haired girl falls back, supporting the elder by holding Ryuuko by her ankles, her weight clogging any kicking movement on her end.

"Snap out of it, Mato!" Satsuki gripes, rolling a still-frothing Ryuuko onto her front and adjusting her grip so that her weight squarely rests on her back.

A hand accidentally brushed against the back of the shorter girl's neck in her attempts to quell her flailing, and she immediately stiffens under her touch, snapping into a somewhat comatose state. As if a plug was pulled, she collapsed suddenly, bonelessly flopping back onto the sibling that held her. Caught off guard, Mako releases her hold on Ryuuko's limbs, letting them fall to the dirtied tiling. Ryuuko's eyes glaze over, a dull sheen slowly marring otherwise vibrant red. A small quivering soon ripples through her flesh, but it is quickly snuffed out of existence.

"Ryuuko."

The brainwashed girl merely rolls onto her side as if on silent command, dislodging her assailant and freely exposing as much of herself to attack as possible. Satsuki stared, baffled. Then, realization strikes with all the weight of a thousand bricks. The pieces came all and together, and it clicked. The instinctual freeze upon the errant touch, the sudden submissiveness, the thousand-yard stare that suddenly replaced the choleric frenzy of mindless rage... Cobalt blue pupils shrunk in absolute terror. Words died in her throat.

'Not you too,' she thought, horrified, almost drawing back and away from the scene unfolding before her now.

Despite herself, she repeats the action, and Ryuuko practically melts under her hand like kakigoori that had been left out for much too long, prostrating herself before the other and even leans into the hand with more than a smoldering patch of fiery desire burning in half-lidded, lustful eyes. A rumbling purr sets itself in the back of her throat, low and crooning. It soon vanishes, however, when nothing comes after the second stroke, and she almost rises, frenzied bloodlust etched into every hulking movement as the images before her become clearer, become more focused.

Satsuki is frozen where she kneels, face pale and flushed. Lungs long refusing to work burn in her chest, desperate in their need for air. Her adamantine will screams at her muscles to move, but the traitorous flesh refuses to obey, to spirit her limbs into a defensive pose. Her mind is racing, and the rushing sound of her furiously pounding heart, so freshly filled with her very sister's liquid life is the only thing she hears above the girl's animalistic bellow for blood pounding in her ears.

To save the world, must you become the very monster you had vowed to destroy?

Nights spent with the room completely bathed in light. A teacup filled to the brim with bitter leaf juice, an aging butler standing politely off to the side. A girl drenched in cold sweat, unable to find rest in the comfort of her own bed.

A hand languidly making its way down her side, snaking above the tops of her thighs and ghosting along the outlines of her breasts.

“You're a good girl, Satsuki...”

The inability feel safe at home ever again.

“Satsuki...”

The rising form of the lost sister before her now, rearing up like the monsters of the past. Flared hair turned upward and a slender body clad entirely in white, so very much like Ragyou's own.

The last, ultimate violation she had willingly endured.

“Let it build up, and when it gets to be too much, let it out all at once...”

A shadow spilling over her resting form, waters still and placid as it grows longer and larger-like nothing had disturbed them at all.

“Let me purify you...”

Purification.

A pause. And then a resolution.

I won't let her change anything between my sister and I!

I'm sorry, ' Satsuki thinks, if only for the little sister trapped inside the shell of a vile creature and bowed to its whims.

She grabs a white-clothed arm and repeats the calming action once more after jerking her close, again finding an almost-tranquil response immediately. The brainwashed girl obediently places herself upon her lap, all semblance of resistance leaving her body. Ryuuko's chin settles upon her sibling's uncharacteristically slouching body, and eyes droop half-closed once more as a relaxed grin graces her once-feral expression.

The silent padding of feet return to her, and she automatically swivels her head to the noise's source, finding a mop of disheveled hair resting atop an equally flustered deva.

"Inumuta," she begins, brows knitting in concern.

"Propofol. Fentanyl, saline" he pants, clutching the numerous vials and transparent plastic bag to his chest. "Got the strongest doses I could find for these two. Not too concerned on concentration, seeing how she can now shrug off sniper bullets that would have easily killed her a few months ago. Hopefully it won't react too badly with the Benadryl Mankanshoku stuffed into her earlier. Administered intravenously. Need to access her port- hopefully she hasn't done anything too extreme. Unfortunately, we only have a fifteen minute window with them. Anything heavier was already stolen."

She nods, watching him fiddle with the cap of a freshly-opened syringe. The slight quiver in her voice, so subtle as to not be noticed by anyone but those closest to her, all but betrayed the calm resolution her face outwardly displayed.

"Do it."

Ryuuko nudges her hand with her nose, and Satsuki unflinchingly returns to her task as Inumuta starts to fill the clear needle with the white liquid. Mako fidgets beside her and reaches over so as to help the ex-President with her task, but Satsuki waves her hands away with one of her own.

'My sins are my own,' she thinks, sadly shaking her head as Mako tilts hers, clearly asking for an explanation in the wake of this sudden turn of events. *'I'm sorry Mankanshoku, but I cannot allow you to burden yourself with... this... ..with this curse of mine, the Kiryuuin secret.'*

Ryuuko notices Mako standing nearby, and she eagerly pulls her down, curling her kamui-clad body around the smaller girl's nearly nude one. The heiress' eyes narrow as the restitched girl buries her nose into Mako's hair. She swears she sees Ryuuko mouth the word "Nui" as she does so, and her disgust magnifies immensely.

Slender fingers riddled with callouses birthed from countless hours of honing her craft with Bakuzan rake over the nape of Ryuuko's neck, and the latter gives a lengthy groan of pleasure. Robotically, it ghosts over the same spot again, a digit smoothing the kamui's fabric.

Cobalt blue eyes widen in interest as the rear of Ryuuko's neck soon yields its secret to her, previously buried under an untamed mass of hair. Flesh slightly darker than that of the tissue surrounding it slightly pokes out from underneath Junketsu's protection, the scar coyly attracting her attention. At its base, a small circular device sits, digging into the soft flesh so that it is almost flush with the surrounding tissue and blinking a soft red light every now and then. She frowns. This must be the tracking device, then. A questing finger brushes against the disfigured tissue, and the no-star delinquent shudders in delight even as the seifuku's collar is pulled away to reveal more of the old wound.

She can only hazard a guess that its origins were unnatural in its birthing. Thumb lightly tapping against the raised tissue, she wonders if this was where they had inserted the life fibers within her body, rather than merely place her in a container filled with live life fibers, as she had been subjected to. Looking closer, she sees that a vertical slit sits perfectly centered on the otherwise smooth skin. Crossing it are seven horizontal lines, all almost equidistant from one another. Together, they give off the appearance of seven stars sitting perfectly atop each other. Any doubt that this truly was her blood-sibling and not the cruel machinations of fate combined with Ragyou's usual lies happening to coincide with an equally coincidentally-looking rebellious student was soon washed away.

Stars. Like the ones they used to denote life fiber percentages by increments of ten. Like the ones that were formed in a brilliant display of synchronization or a flashy show of power whenever the kamuis were involved.

Seven stars.

Seven.

Almost like the ones on the back of...

No. It will do no good to mention the monster by her name now.

Hands trembling the slightest bit despite herself, she mimics what Ragyou had done in the baths, one painful movement at a time. It doesn't help in the slightest bit that Ryuuko actually appreciates the gesture and openly revels in it. It sickens her. Bile churns in her stomach, threatening to make her expel its admittedly sparse contents.

But what drives the final nail into her heart- more than when Inumuta finally procures the much-needed medicine and injects the milky white chemical cocktail into her IV and lets Ryuuko gradually lose all consciousness- is the small, murmured "mother" that escapes her lips just as she passes out, body crumpling on Satsuki's open lap.

Satsuki stares at her Elite with an unreadable expression, a blank stare masking the surprise that would have been interpreted as a thin-lipped glower to the common bystander. It is clear that he heard it as well. Clearing his throat, he opts to step over the obvious landmine and chooses to discuss a less sensitive topic instead. For this, Satsuki is grateful, and infinitely so.

"I theorized that our weapons were ineffective specifically because we were targeting her life fibers. It appears they have been using her flesh and nervous system to bypass Nudist Beach's weapon effects. So, drug her human side with human tranquilizers rather than life fiber coagulants, and bingo. Instant knockout. Let's hope that Mankanshoku's medicine won't kill her."

"And now?" Satsuki speaks slowly, hoping he hadn't noticed the croak in her voice just now.

"And now we wait."

Mako slips out of her friend's hold, rolling away as Houka motions for the elder Kiryuuin to force her to lie flat.

Cautiously, he sweeps his PDA over her unconscious body, letting the scanner do the job for him. Soon enough, a dark silhouette of Ryuuko is printed out on the screen before him, with a series of wildly fluctuating vitals and numbers Houka makes a sound that lies somewhere between horrified wonder and fascination, and double-taps at a glowing point at the figure's head, zooming in and parsing the data to only include values from that specified region. The green pixelated screen soon confirms his suspicions, and he shares his findings with his superior. Amidst the sea of data, diagram of the nervous system within in a rough dark shape of a human is presented in its center, with miniature fine lines practically encompassing its entirety. Of particular interest is the indicated nerve cluster at the base of the skull, thrumming with activity even in her unconscious state.

He gives a low noise of amazement, and adjusts his glasses out of force of habit.

"I've managed to analyze the data on Matoi and Junketsu's binding. Unfortunately, it's total neural integration in addition to direct access to more than a handful of arterioles thanks to Harime's stitching. That means that Junketsu retains control over direction of most thought process even when the activation plates haven't been triggered- exponentially more so when they are. In layman's terms, they are effectively one being at any moment- there is absolutely no way to separate them without repercussions even if she isn't synchronized with it. At best, removal would cause loss of function in multiple organs or motor abilities; at worst, we're looking at death from sudden shock coupled with tremendous blood loss."

Mako's head pops up over Houka's shoulder, pupils licking over the rapidly scrolling texts in pure fascination as her neck strains from the effort. She can't understand any of it, but the numbers pinned on the digital manifestation of Ryuuko's image look impressive. She gapes.

"What what what what whaaaaat????"

Satsuki, however, is quietly absorbing this new material, hawk-eyes scanning the nervous cluster as it pulsed with white energy on the screen. Wordlessly, she turns back to Ryuuko, tunnel vision locked on the upturned mop of hair, and the scarred mass it had hidden underneath for so long.

The neck.

The neck, with seven stars.

The neck, where the life fibers were inserted into her system. The neck, where she and this monster were forever bound.

She lifts up the white sailor uniform's lengthy collar once again, this time sweeping over the skin with a scrutinizing gaze. And, one by one, fibers mere micrometers in width materialize, tugging at the uniform cloth's individual strands and bringing them to burrow underneath heated skin like the parasites they were. Although bright red in coloring, it is easy to miss their appearances within cursory inspections. She presses against the scar tissue with the pad of a thumb, mindful of the strands, and is not all surprised to feel the skin immediately flush red with color and the visible life fibers give off small yellow pulses towards the skin as a response.

Of course. The neck, a neurological goldmine. The site that brought her a cursed life as a life fiber hybrid and gave birth to Senketsu's consciousness. It would make sense to tie Junketsu's threads there- let them intermingle with the original fibers placed there. Nothing short of a miracle would save her now.

"So what she said about them being one entity was true..." Satsuki murmurs to herself.
"Junketsu... and Ryuuko..."

Houka meanwhile is saving the data to the small device, holding it out of reach as Mako climbs atop his shoulders and tries to pull it closer for her to read at her own leisure. She waves him over and he, thankful for the distraction his superior provided, padded over, barely managing to escape the no-star's grasp. With a single finger, she lifts the royal blue-lined cloth to expose the device underneath, and he obliges in its removal. It is easily disposed of by being crushed underfoot with a booted heel, and the ex-dictator makes sure to grind it well into the ground for good measure.

"We'll worry about this later. She can probably just explain that she had it destroyed during a combat situation, or that it was eliminated due to being dislodged."

"That does not explain why she rescued you from Harime and brought you here- even with your rather successful attempts at making her view you in a more favorable manner-, nor does it explain why she doesn't simply capture you and bring you to Ragyou herself."

Satsuki shakes her head. "Unless it specifically wants me alive. There is a lot of things about Junketsu we were never able to explain, even with the funds and tools we had at our disposal during our reign over Honnouji. Perhaps my father's notes could shed light on this."

Experimentally, she moves her hands above the unconscious girl's breasts, noting with interest as orange cloth shifts to reveal pupils tracking her hovering hands. The heiress makes a small sound of approval.

"As I've mentioned earlier, there is much we don't know about how deep their connection goes. Regardless of our knowledge- or lack of thereof- having them as allies would far outweigh the possible losses, isn't that right, Inumuta?"

"Assuming our theories are valid, I would assume it to be correct."

She frowns now, lines creasing flawless skin and creating ugly furrows above spindle-shaped brows. "Any information on why Ryuuko maintains a form of free will or why she has yet to remove the kamui even though she knows Ragyou lied to her about having a perfect childhood? I observed her verbally communicating with it approximately a week ago. Later conversation indicates their ability to speak through their shared neurological pathways."

He hums. "Unsure. Perhaps it conditioned her to only remain loyal to it. A possible explanation would follow in the similar vein as double-booting. Have two systems to balance the workload and to execute functions that would normally not be executable on one single platform. It's akin to having operating systems in place in one computer so that you can run programs normally exclusive to one of the OSs. Or we can assume it's a form of energy-efficient control.

I theorize that Junketsu is allowing Matoi to run autonomously within set parameters so it can focus its attention elsewhere. It's the difference between someone controlling someone else while that second person is also controlling a system and risking something happening in that extra seconds of lag time, and letting them react to stimuli on their own. Very complex. If Matoi cannot handle one thing, perhaps then it assumes direct control. Need to examine reaction times in both synchronized and unsynchronized forms. Determine range of abilities.”

She nods, convinced. But Kiryuuin Satsuki dealt with solid facts only, not trivial musings and guessing. Ryuuko stirs, her short bangs twitching as the drug wears off. Houka moves to inject another two vials of the sedative-anesthetic combo, but she merely raises a hand, effectively stopping him in his tracks. She gets an idea, rubbing Ryuuko’s upper arms soothingly.

“Ryu- ah- Junketsu.”

Ryuuko sleepily rolls towards her and squarely nestles herself on her back, quizzically shooting a questioning glance and squinting all the while. She sees nothing but white cloth in front of her with her ruined vision thanks to the blanket draped over the other's shoulders, and she willingly relaxes her guard.

“Mother?”

Satsuki swallows, feigning an air of indifference as she tailors her speech to match that of their mother's even though she knows her voice of steel is no match for the auditory velvet that monster used. She speaks in very general questions, and is rewarded with curt, respectful answers that return in between occasional overly-affectionate snuggles and suggestive attempts at something more. But her senses, honed far past that of a normal human told her something was amiss, that she was hiding something, deliberately divulging the least amount of information in tandem with surprisingly subtle attempts to redirect the conversation with physical wiles.

So she doesn’t poke, doesn’t prod, but instead presses down upon her both literally and figuratively. Ryuuko was clay that was long hardened by the trials and tribulations of this world. The thumb of circumstance had molded her well, gave her a strong, well developed form and an iron-grit determination to boot. Ragyou’s thumb had been merely manipulative by comparison, only knowing how to scratch off details of life and etch new scales into her dragon-daughter’s hide rather than reformatting her figure completely. Her craft was in deception, and she had wielded it well. But Satsuki’s mastery in that art was just as refined in terms of technique, and she pressed again upon Ryuuko, commanding her mold.

The hybrid squirms against her, uncomfortable, and Satsuki merely applies more pressure until the erratic movement stills and the younger is left with no choice but to curl with her back against her and lie quietly. Ryuuko remains splayed beneath her hand even as they shift to a less cluttered section of the floor and she is jostled far more times than one could count on both hands in the span of a minute. The elder feels some sort of power rush through her as Ryuuko rumbles beneath- the thrill of having a wild beast lie under her control, to feel a sick pleasure in having such a feral thing’s might ripple under your touch, barely controlled and ready to be unleashed on an unsuspecting bystander at any moment.

With warm breath and measured voice, she starts to mechanically list off questions one by one, receiving truthful answers in return. Information on how tightly knit the kamui and wearer are? Done. Description of their hierarchy? Willingly given. All are accompanied by soft, languid touches to the smaller's ear, suspending her in a mental limbo, keeping the dream from being broken. Her eyes remain dull, and her form lax as she soaks the questing asks all in.

And then, the final question of vital importance- the one that would decide the course of fate for all of humanity. A throat made harsh from countless speeches past uttered honeyed words, attempting to sound uncharacteristically gentle. Rough and grating they were, like a crow song imitating that of a common songbird. Leaning close, breath tickling her ear, she pauses a hand over the flat of the smaller's stomach, just like the monster of their shared mother used to do when she was younger.

"Ryuuko, dear. Where is Satsuki?"

Ryuuko blinks once, the action sloppy and uncoordinated in her chemical stupor. Her eyes narrow, squinting in the dim lighting, and for the briefest of seconds, Satsuki fears that her ploy had been seen through. Then, her face splits in a wolfish grin, and she tilts her face upward, lovingly placing kisses along the elder's jaw and resting her lips against the flush of her throat.

"Taken care of, mother. I saw her attacking Nui and couldn't help myself. I left her body to rot in a gorge. Her precious elites will find her carved into pieces. I made sure of it. "

Satsuki grimly smiles. So that was her game. "Tell me, Ryuuko. Did you know of why I allowed her to live? Of why she was of vital importance to our plans?"

"N...no... I thought... I thought you..." she slurs, a small shaking starting to encompass her still form as she realizes her mistake. She shrinks into herself, attempting to make herself smaller and less visually threatening. "I'm sorry, mother!"

Satsuki hums, letting her stew in her own guilt. Ryuuko, for the most part, lies there, disjointed thoughts attempting to piece themselves together in the haze of her drugged mind. Confusion embroils her even as the words spoken to her themselves turn nasty, turn berating and harsh in enunciation. Didn't she want her dead in the first place? Shinra Kouketsu aside, couldn't the kamui just eat several other people in her place- like those four dogs that used to follow her around? Her mind screams at her to rebel, to free herself from the invisible chains firmly secured around her limbs and slake her bloodlust by ending the life of the liar behind her, but her body refuses to cooperate.

"Obey your master," it whispers to her. "Crawl along the ground like the beast she thinks you are and shuffle along the route it leads you with the chain she tied around your neck until you can one day rise and break free. Shout loud your silence, and poison her with the venom use uses on you."

So she stills, albeit reluctantly, enduring the harsh words and seemingly endless criticism flung her way.

Time passes, and even though Satsuki speaks no more, she obeys her silent whims. The uncharacteristic deference doesn't last long, however. Ryuuko says nothing, but her posture and demeanor is changing, morphing from that of a submissive one to one of a waking beast, of one armed with teeth and claws rising from beyond the dark depths of the forest to ravage the poor innocent souls that unfortunately stumbled across it. She parts her mouth, sharpened teeth catching in the fading light, and snarls. It comes out ragged, wolf-like, and it is an ugly sound. Satsuki pauses in her careful ministrations, noting her dilating pupils. They were focusing, losing their dull sheen and regaining their usual keen, malicious gleam. The hybrid twitches, rising from her position in Satsuki's lap with an unparalleled glare of pure hatred.

"Inumuta," she says, keeping her unflinchingly eyes trained on her sibling's unnaturally colored ones. "The drugs. Administer them now."

He rushes in, the milky white liquid already prepped in a syringe, grabbing the hybrid's wrist and slipping the dose in her veins with a mere push of the needle's plunger. Ryuuko struggles against him, effortlessly flinging him away into rotting drywall and ripping the spent syringe from where it lay in the IV port. But the drugs are already taking effect, and her already-clumsy movements are magnified, turned even less organized than usual and characterized akin to those of a drunkard.

Then, with a small groan, she collapses, first onto her knees, and then later on her side. Her muscles are tense, visibly rippling amid veins prominently brought to the forefront of pale skin as she fights off the intense urge to sleep once more. She quickly loses the battle, however, and with one last growl of defiance, is quickly taken under by the relentless weight that assaults her eyelids and the heavy burden that eats away at her mind until there is nothing left.

Houka pants, massaging his aching muscles as he staggers up to his Lady with as much dignity as possible.

"What would you have us do with her, Lady Satsuki?"

Satsuki eyes the sleeping sibling contemplatively. Ryuuko is curled in on herself, hands nestling against both miniaturized scissor halves and clutching them like they were the only thing left to her in this crazy world of theirs. And in a manner of speaking, they were. Violence and bloody conflict were the only constants; such was life to her. She takes a moment to compose her thoughts, to mentally envision the chessboard that she, Ryuuko, and Ragyou were navigating their pieces in. When she does speak, she does it slowly, adding pauses at-length while playing out hundreds of different scenarios simultaneously. Her voice is steady as a beating drum, and it is a warm welcome to those buffeted by the worst of the COVERS-run apocalypse.

"We let her go."

Inumuta's silence indicates his agreement with his Lady's decision, however conflicted he is with his own personal judgements. Mankanshoku, however, is understandably confused, and vocally enunciates it so.

"Behh!? We're letting Ryuuko-chan go?"

The former dictator takes a moment to compose herself, gathering the paltry remains of logical thought on this subject matter before proceeding.

“While risky, there are certain benefits in having her remain active and outside of our jurisdiction, such as maintaining the illusion of her obedience to Ragyou. Retaining her in our possession does nothing for our end, and in fact may pre-emptively incur an attack. Ryuuko’s ability to sense my location only when I’m synchronized with Senketsu may be shared with nearby COVERS, if she decides she wants nothing to do with us and hails them by repeatedly synchronizing with Junketsu. Needless to say, such a large gathering would undoubtedly attract unwanted attention.”

Her explanation isn’t a complete lie- the concerns about unwanted discovery by Ragyou were wholly honest. However, her reasons for not detaining her troublesome imp of a sibling weren’t. True, having Ryuuko in their possession would force Ragyou to divert her attention, but having Ryuuko free-roaming would maintain an air of normalcy. Although... surely Nui had told mother about Ryuuko’s intervention by now, even though it is almost impossible from her point of view. Nui’s pride would have galvanized her to level the entire continent for the sake of sadistically torturing her poor victims to a bloody death before crawling back to answer for her lack of action in defending the third kamui. But... she did willingly give her blood to save her... Maybe...

She clears her throat, soon reaching a decision.

“However, her responses indicate her willingness to hide any and all of my survival to Ragyou and allowing us to attempt destruction of the third kamui. With our successful attack on Shinra Koketsu, they will undoubtedly retreat into the Kiryuuin Mansion as soon as possible. This brings us to my next point- taking Ragyou and the Primordial Life Fiber down in one fell swoop.

It is unintentional if Matoi planned it this way when she passed me Honnouji’s master key. Perhaps she intended us to get more life fibers rather than directly deal damage to the kamui. Whatever she intended, however, is not important. I assume enough life fibers had been collected by Sanageyana from the unexpected COVERS ambush two weeks ago and today’s raid to start forming combat uniforms again. Inumuta, please inform Iori to start working on creating his three-star uniform first. Then he may proceed with yours and the rest of the devas’. We’ll also need to hail Mr. Mikisugi, if he’s successfully fended off his attackers. I believe he had help from a Mr. Kinagase onboard.”

“Does that mean-?”

“Correct. We shall take her with us, and then release her when all is said and done. It is much too dangerous for our plan to just leave us here without any context. If we do so, she may believe we had betrayed her, and we will lose her as an asset,” she stretched, moving her sister’s weight off her legs. “Plus, without the tracker on her, we no longer need to worry about whether it would appear better to Ragyou if she was moving constantly, assuming Nui had reported back. Her disappearance can be dismissed as a mere fight that dragged on for far too long.”

Sighing mentally while outwardly maintaining a perfect poker face, Houka reached to his ear and pressed against the commsys.

“We need the Nudist chopper sent to the coordinates I'm sending you now, ASAP. There is a helipad on the top of the building we are currently located at. I encountered no COVERS enroute here, so it still should be free of any obstructions. Additionally, I'm reasonably sure the building is structurally sound, so he can land without worry.”

There is a short crackle of static before Nonon responds, words tinged with her usual venom and gleefully laced with a biting edge.

“What? Did the underachiever puke her brains out again and need an emergency evac?”

Another buzz of dead air. Silence as the opposing end's side was keyed in but no words were said. Then speech, riddled with poorly-hidden concern and righteous fury.

“Wait. Is it for Lady Satsuki? I *told* you we should have sent someone else besides the underachiever, doggy. She better h-”

Inumuta rolls his eyes and presses the bead in his ear again, effectively cutting off the snake mid-sentence.

“Lady Satsuki is fine. We'll explain her condition later.”

He swallows, taking quite a bit of time to choose his next words.

“It's Matoi. We've captured her.”

The next reply took a long while to return, and when it came back, it was curiously devoid of the pinkette's usual manner. Instead, it was now intoned with pure worry- an understandable fear given the ex-delinquent's gleeful propensity to intentionally commit homicide.

“You're not suggesting we house that... thing... with us.”

“That's the thing, Jakuzure...”

He watches as Satsuki lifts her sister's sleeping form onto her shoulders in a quasi-fireman's carry, one arm curled around an arm and leg to bring the limbs against her chest and the other firmly wrapped around her respective sword set- Ryuuko's scissor blades are still hooked to her golden chain belt and thankfully do not require any assistance. Ryuuko twitches in her slumber, unconsciously curling around her sibling tighter in a bid to find extra warmth in the elder. No longer conscious and an active threat to their existence, her appearances are softer, less feral, more reminiscent of a time only she knew where the only thing on her mind was finally meeting up with her dad after years of almost radio silence. Mako attends at the older woman's side, bouncing on her heels at the thought of reuniting with her best friend and talking with her, no matter how viscous said friend's personality currently was or how Ryuuko thought badly of her.

“Lady Satsuki's orders may seem irrational and even contradictory, but in the end, she has

always led us to victory, even if it appears as if we have suffered a major defeat. While we may question her motives ourselves, it is without doubt that she has our- and by extension, the world's- interests at heart, even when her enigmatic intentions include temporarily housing a homicidal maniac with easy access to her weapons in our presence.”

Je vole ou je cours pour vous délivrer

(I will run or fly to deliver you)

Chapter End Notes

2 points if you saw the shoutout to the show's name without reading this.

In the first edition of the chapter, the events of Razormind were not supposed to happen (Satsuki was supposed to tell a Benadryl-drugged Ryuuko the true timeline of events of what happened through her eyes), but I changed it because of Razormind's last-minute additions and edits. Ryuuko and Satsuki were supposed to be still hostile with one another. Satsuki was scripted to fight Harime in Toukyou/Tokyo city for [[object of super vital importance to plot]], defeat her, and reclaim the scissor sword but lose [[plot object of power]] in the process. Ryuuko then was supposed to retrieve Harime and actually hand over the object before flying away, surprising Satsuki and making her question her true loyalty to Ragyou. I took that chapter out because it made no sense (why would Harime be fighting Satsuki in a city, much less be there for a non-life fiber-related reason?) and because the plot object was stupid (it was supposed to be a tech piece or battery or chip that would allow them to modify the Naked Sol to be more powerful and stuff).

Honnouji being rigged with explosives is a callback to Switzerland- a country built with more than 3,000 explosive demolition points within their civil infrastructure to prevent invasion. Satsuki also rigged the festival arena with explosives and made the entire academy as a sailor-suit mecha, so it isn't a far fetched idea to have her rig the entire island up to blow. I mean, how else did they sink the island so fast?

Blood transfusions are usually done with an IV drip/infusion over the course of 1-4 hours, depending on how much blood is needed. I have no experience with direct transfusion machines; I assume they don't exist in real life due to the inability of lab techs to make sure the donor won't accidentally kill the recipient via an immune response.

Ryuuko is O+ for her blood type, and Satsuki is A+. It is possible to receive an O blood type even if both Ragyou and Souichirou were non-O-type blooded because of 3-allele genetics.

Ryuuko (Int): REM

Chapter Summary

Ryuuko dreams, still sedated by the medical cocktail forced into her system. Memories of the past, long locked under the kamui's hold, come to her in her drug-addled mind, freed from their prison.

Chapter Notes

Usually, REM refers to Rapid Eye Movement- a sign that one is in deep sleep and is therefore dreaming. Here, it refers to Rage, Evisceration, and Murder- basically everything that Ryuuko will feel (and feel like doing) once she wakes up.

**" Mais, je ne savais pas, je ne savais pas,
Pourquoi tu ne m'a pas dit, que tu souffrais?
Je serais venu vite vers toi."**

(But I didn't know, I didn't know,
Why didn't you tell me that you suffered?
I would have come to you [sooner].)

"I don't want to!"

The shriek of impertinent resistance, the stubborn resolution to never go to this school of theirs is paired with a foot stomp that echoes loudly in the empty rooms and emptier halls.

Isshin rubs his temples wearily, a migraine forming. This disobedience, this violent outburst of raw emotion was so very much unlike the normally docile child. He couldn't keep her here, not when his research was getting too dangerous, too dependent on procured resources that would surely attract the most unwanted of attention. He knows how callously vicious his wife- his ex-wife, he corrects himself- could be, how cold and uncaring she was to all human life. Her dismissal of Ryuuko's initial death and her contract to see to his utter annihilation had proven that point many times over.

It was simply too bad that he couldn't have rescued Satsuki that fateful night in his scheme to escape the Kiryuuin clutches, free his firstborn in the process, and reunite the siblings. He tried- and failed. Ragyou caught him just as he grabbed the small child's hand and ran with her to the parked sedan he had out in the back. She had all but ripped Satsuki from his grasp,

snatching his daughter away with those falcon talons of hers. He stumbled as he escaped through a window, shattering it in the process and stumbled to his car, his wife watching furiously from the other side with the young child gripped in a death-hold against her breasts.

“Kuroido,” she coldly ordered to the overweight attendant standing behind her and off to the side, pointing her long-nailed finger at the vehicle as its tires squealed and the car burst through the meticulously maintained shrubbery and headed down the road. “Take care of that pest for me, would you?”

He could never forget Satsuki’s crestfallen expression at those words as he looked back through the rear view mirror. The death sentence so casually felled upon the innocent, her face turned white as a sheet as the fat man grinned wickedly and bowed.

“It will be done, my Lady.”

“Ryuuko, please listen to me,” he murmurs, sweeping her off her feet and onto his lap where she sits with her arms crossed and a foul affronted expression on her face, adamantly looking in any direction but his own. “I am sorry, but you can't stay with me any longer. I can't explain everything to you right now, but-.”

“Then I want to live with Auntie!” she shouted, locking her fiery gaze upon his startled own. “I don't want to go away! I want to stay here with you and Auntie Kinue!”

Kinue.

His expression dropped, and she noticed, quieting as he gently held her close and weaved a hand through her mismanaged mane, scratching her scalp gently.

“Auntie...” he choked, struggling not to tear up as the incident, so fresh in his mind, threatened to make the gathering moistness in his eyes spill over. “Auntie Kinue isn't coming back, sweetie. Auntie had an accident.”

The look of shock and crushed disappointment he received was worse than the shoulder-mounted rpg to end his life a thousand times over.

She remembered clinging to the frayed ends of his lab coat, digging her heels into the ground and kicking up more than a small amount of dirt along the way. She is adamant, resisting to the bitter end the new fate forced upon her. A backpack sits heavy and unwelcome upon her shoulders, filled with notebooks and writing utensils, Kiyoshi-chan tucked neatly into a side pocket, where the young girl would never be able to forget where the stuffed pig sat.

Her father disengaged her hold with a small hip-snap and walks on ahead, already greeting the administrative personnel by the entrance. She trails behind, looking down at the ground even as the trio strange adults gather around her and attempt to verbally comfort her.

It doesn't work.

She notices him leaving, drawn by the clacking of his bamboo sandals and the whipping white of the unusual attire he favored. She extends a hand to him in vain, voice choked and utterly heartbroken.

“Dad! Daddy! Don't leave me!”

She crumples to her knees with a choked sob when he doesn't even so much as look back. Kiyoshi-chan is the only thing that comforts her that night, and every night after that for a long time.

“Teacher?”

The young elementary school instructor turned to face her charge, soothing the nervous wreck of a girl before her with a disarming smile.

“Yes, Ryuuko? What is it?”

“What does this mean?”

She furrowed her brows. “What does what mean?”

“This,” Ryuuko innocently continued, curling her hand into a fist with the back of her hand facing the elder and raising the longest finger in a ninety degree angle. “Junichi showed it to me.”

She never did quite understand why her teacher screamed in horror then, nor did she understand why she was made to sit in the corner for the rest of the day.

She stutters, she is hesitant in her speech, even when by herself. She speaks to no one, and no one speaks to her.

When she is forced to, she lapses, goes in tangents so as to build a firm base upon which to solidify her logic upon. But the responses all come the same, all impatient and unwilling to wait.

“Speak up, Ryuuko.”

“En-un-ci-ate, Miss Matoi. Please. I don't believe I comprehend why Emi and Daisuke have complaints about you in their group.”

“I don't understand. Can you explain why you did this?”

It is at the tender age of seven that she realizes that the problem isn't her and her communication skills- it's just that everyone around her is just so fantastically stupid and

couldn't be bothered to see the broader scope of things.

She resolves to be curter in her responses. Actions spoke louder than words, after all.

The first and only punch she throws in response to someone tugging painfully at her bright red streak is more deafening than a shotgun blast.

Junior high school passes by her in a blur.

The habit of beating others to instill respect towards her person followed her well throughout her younger days, as with the exceptionally short temper to boot. In those times, the spiteful jokes thrown her way about the father that never bothered to see her or speak to her became too much for her to peacefully tolerate- not when her peers correlated her abandonment to being able to get away with just about anything in their abuse.

There was a small group of fellow students that didn't try to toy with her, however, and she treated them with mutual indifference. Of them, one of them came to her one day and asked if was all right if he followed behind her, knowing her reputation and his record of being antagonized by the same groups of people that targeted her. Hesitantly, she gave him her permission, and he tailed behind from that day forward, defending her person in words and in turn being defended by her fists.

Of course, the peace didn't last very long, as some prepubescent relationships of opposite sexes and rowdy personalities tended to occur. He became haughty, arrogant, believing himself just as strong as the one he shadowed as hormones kicked in and he started growing taller and more hardy. When he publicly denounces her as a pushover in front of everyone gathered in interest of their squabble, she makes doubly sure that he goes home with all of his fingers and most of his teeth broken mere minutes later.

She is walking down the streets of a town one day, jacket lazily thrown over her shoulder and the last remains of a snackfood clutched in roughened fingers. She is window shopping again- a travesty born of limited funds and an inborn aversion to public intermingling. She passes by a bridal store and, nose pressed against immaculately polished glass, gazes wistfully at beauty incarnate, with its magnificent accents and royal train flowing behind. She feels nothing but unadulterated awe at the dress, with its many layers and silken bows. And, quite bitterly, a stab of resentment- a wistful longing to one day find someone that would appreciate her and perhaps even love her, more than her absent father, more than life itself.

The sound of cracking knuckles and her name snarled in utter revulsion summons her attention. Glowering pacific blue spiked with eight equidistant marks narrowed, glinting in the harsh sunlight 'neath a mismanaged mane. Nine pairs of shoes surrounded her, their owners leisurely tapping an assortment of homemade weapons- bats with nails hammered into them at varying angles, broken hockey sticks, and makeshift knives.

Their leader pushes past the motley group with an arrogant swagger, arms akimbo and chest puffed up with inflated self-importance. His attire is flashy, cheap metallic gold forming a thin suit-coat underneath a sun-bleached frayed scarf of pure silk. He brandishes a broken machete, the blade chipped along its dulled edge and snapped at the tip, and points it towards the schoolgirl, sneering as she straightens up to defiantly look him in the eye. The knife grinds against mortar and brick, a thin trail of white following in its wake.

“Well, if it isn’t Matoi! What makes you think that you can just waltz into our turf like this? Pay up, or prepare for a world of pain!”

She gives him a feral grin, exposing her chipped canine. A thick frothy wad of spit lands at his scuffed footwear, and she wipes the remaining spittle from carmine red lips.

“Heh. You wish. Piss off, petals, and I’ll go easy on you.”

Muscles roll and visibly ripple in preparation, and she bends her knees in anticipation as he shouts the order to maul her. She struggles not to succumb to the thrilling rush of adrenaline as it burns through her veins, waiting for the first fool to throw a punch before snapping a hand up to snatch his wrist mid-air, driving a knee into his solar plexus and swinging an elbow downward. The sound of snapping bone and a fresh agonized howl do little to stop the rest of the gang from advancing however, and her world becomes a blur of movements and intermittent bursts of spraying blood.

She dances, and death waltzes with her every step of the way.

Thirteen year olds shouldn’t have mauled others. Thirteen year olds shouldn’t have mauled others to the point of needing ambulances. Thirteen year olds shouldn’t have more teeth chipped than otherwise in the history leading up to this point, nor should they have an endless litany of bones broken over the ages. Thirteen year olds shouldn’t have a rap sheet taller than themselves. Thirteen year olds shouldn’t trudge back to their dorm room at the end of the day covered in a menagerie of bruises and scars and a cocktail of blood- both collected from others and drawn from their own. Thirteen year olds shouldn’t feel such a sick pleasure from inflicting pain on other human beings. Thirteen year olds shouldn’t have any of these things, but it’s hard to argue against harming another person when they themselves had no qualms about doing the same to you.

She notices she’s getting stronger now. Her fists can do more than bloody noses and knock loose teeth. Her technique had improved, became as swift as the whipping winds and powerful as the raging sea, as flexible as bamboo stalks and fearsome as the legendary Yakuza. For every small bone that is fractured, she breaks a hundred larger ones in revenge. For every injustice inflicted upon her, she dealt one injustice more in repayment. In countless brawls, she learns to dispatch low-tiered mooks with naught but phalangeal dislocations, and scare their leaders into submission by threatening to do the same to them- but with the rest of the bones in their limbs.

In time, her name spreads like wildfire, and hardened gang members she never met before slink away in her presence, shamefully bowing their heads and moving to the shadows like dogs with their tail tucked between their legs. Her titles accumulate, becoming less than a badge of shame and growing as things to proudly collect, to display shamelessly for all to see. A social outcast, a monster made of something terrible, something wild and unbound she may be, but even monsters feel.

She remembered ash and fire. The embers in the air, blips burning bright among larger smears painting the smoky backdrop with tongues of bright yellow flames. She remembers a scream.

Hers?

She remembers dropping the bloody half of the blade, charging back into the very place she had not called home in ten years, heedless of the danger the raging inferno provided. Not now, not now! Not when she was so close to reuniting with him! Not when she was so close to getting the answers she had wondered over for the past couple years!

“Dad! Dad!”

A filthy pair of sneakers vaulted over a crackling banister, slamming against cherry and mahogany. Like a sparrow in a storm, she flits in and out of the blaze with honed agility, dodging the collapsing drop ceiling. The hissing wave of certain death laps at her clothing, singing it, heating her skin and sending waves of searing pain up her exposed limbs. But she cares not for the dangers it poses, not when her goal is so tantalizingly held before her.

After all, fire cannot burn a dragon.

He notices her approaching and he weakly raises his head up to behold his second daughter once more, outline wavering in the intense light and eyes moistened with unshed wetness. His blood has formed a magnificent red cape around his crumpled form, seeping deep into the expensive wood flooring and ensuring their permanent stain. The oppressive warmth threatens to ignite the life fibers donned upon his body, and for a moment he wishes it so, so that the poor waif he crowned with this circlet of thorns could finally truly see him just as she once did when she was naught but a mere child with no knowledge of the world save for the words ‘hosaki’ and ‘hoisin sauce’.

Stupid.

Foolish.

Stupid, foolish man.

“Ryuuko,” he hoarsely whispers, heavily mustachioed face pulling the slightest bit in a long-suffering grimace. “I’m sorry...”

Sanguine splatters on pearl. He hacks a splattering wave of ichor once more, spackling his tattered lab coat and the tops of her shoes even further. Breaths come in ragged and labored, lungs working overtime to extend their host's life for yet another few precious minutes.

And he wants to use the paltry remains of his draining life to disclose everything he hid from her. Her sister. Her mother. The plot to encase the world in a cocoon sphere. The decade-long abandonment. The long days and nights of planning, of composing himself for just this moment. The secret hidden underneath their feet.

Her legacy.

But he is too weak, too slow. His mouth tries to form the words, but his voice comes out as a tired hiss instead. He wets his mouth with spit and tries again, but the crackling of flames and the din of falling wooden supports all but drowns out what he has to say.

He is fading fast.

As if he were a passive observer outside his body, he watches his body all but embrace Ryuuko and formally baptize her into a fate of pain and sleepless nights, actions communicating more than a few dozen words could. She backs away from where her crying face had all but buried itself against his wounded chest, leaving a blotchy carmine mark down her right eye- a morbid mirror of a similarly colored one swooping over her left and proudly contrasting against its hairy midnight blue backdrop.

He doesn't want her to remember him as a shriveled shell of himself. He wants her last memory of him to be of him struggling bitterly against death's hold on his heart, for the first lesson he imposed on his firstborn is determined to be the last lesson he wants imparted on the fiberborn.

Snatch life from the jaws of death.

She crashes through a window and into the garden as the flames rear up and consume him, encouraged by the massive amounts of dry tinder and welcoming oxygen, body rolling to a complete stop near a gnarled tree with a deep cavity within. The grass, still wet from morning's dew, soothes her burning wounds, licking the hurt away with damp tongues of thin green blades. Her half-curved form is crowned with shards of shattered glass, clear crystals darkened with curling black smoke and reflecting the flickering firelight- a mosaic in the making. Breaking and reformation. Twin opposing forces. The cycle of death and rebirth.

In the distance, sirens pierce the still air with their cries. Strobe lights of red, so very much like the blood on her face and on her clothing and in her veins, flare as they creep closer to the building burning bright. Their melody grows blaring, uncomfortable as many trucks pull up to the conflagration and hoses hiss as high-pressure torrents of water battle the blaze.

But the Kiryuuin child cannot hear them, for she is deaf to all but the sound of her own sorrow, of her heart punting into her throat as every beat it made threatened to tear itself out of her chest. A lost seven-year old embroiled in a chaotic life of sudden loss once more, she curls into herself that much more tighter and clenches her fists, willing her eyes to permanently shut.

For the first time she can remember in ten years, she tucks her head into her chest and weeps bitterly.

They find her in the nightfall under a pregnant moon rising from the mountains, surrounded by smoky panes of amorphous material and fallen yellow fruits once their task is completed. Her unresisting form is carried over to a nearby ambulance and treated onsite for the somehow minor burns she sustained despite her heavily singed clothing telling a different story. They part her from the burnt material practically fused to her skin and carefully wipe away the blood marring her visage, solemnly attending to their task. She wakes as they load her into the truck, and scrambles out on all fours like a wild animal to stand before the incinerated remains of her former childhood home.

“Dad! Dad!”

Her legs spirit her over to the entranceway before they can stop her, and it is only with the timely intervention of a passing fireman that she is held back before her feet cross the threshold and disappear her into the looming darkness within. Her mess of untamed hair pokes over their shoulder, however, and she stills herself upon sight of the destruction, of the black char that became so prevalent within amidst the smoldering remains. Her gaze shifts past the destroyed rooms, of the chairs she used to hide under and the pantry she used to raid.

And in the far back, as far as her eyes can see, she sees the shadow of a man that used to be there- a skeletal imprint against the distant wall.

Her breath catches in her throat, and for a moment, her heart ceases to beat.

She never thought that ghosts could be so alive.

She kept the burnt remains of her clothes, carefully budgeting her remaining monies after selling all other material goods in her life and purchasing another set. It wasn't so that she wouldn't forget that fateful day, of course- it was for more than mere sentimental reasons regarding the only familiar member she had acting far more distant than otherwise healthy relationships included to some degree.

She often looked upon herself in a mirroring lake just as she did later that fateful night, not entirely surprised to find her scleras reddened and her cheeks puffy from the bitter tears that managed to slip by. However, what she did not expect to find was the glint of softly glowing scarlet that sometimes flickered in and out of existence, right where her pacific blue depths were. At those times, she merely shakes her head and attributes it to a play of the light, a mere illusion brought on by distress.

She is shuffled into temporary homes one after the other, an unfortunate result of red tape, muddled bureaucracy, and the misguided belief that a organized familial structure introduced

so late in her life would have a positive impact on her. The families that took her in aren't quite sure how to handle her however, not when she was a red-hot typhoon of whirling emotions and impulsive actions. They are cold, indifferent to her presence just as her father once was, disapproving of her nonconformity and rebellious nature.

So she deserts every one of them in the dead of night on a randomly selected day, and takes with her the motley assortment of clothing left to her from her earlier life and the mysterious red blade. Sometimes, she hopes that one of them would care enough to file a search request or lead a party out to find her. She calls out to them, purposefully leaves telltale hints on where she went each time she does so in hopes that one of them would show up and bring her home.

She waits. And waits. And waits.

But nobody came.

In time, she falls back to old habits and spends the nights outside under the stars, using trees as cover when the weather turned gloomy and making a nest to curl up in out of old jackets and clothes she used to wear. The brunt of any depressive emotion she may feel during this time is stemmed, the girl busying herself with mindless tasks like rearranging leaves or organizing sticks.

Life is much easier to tolerate when you realized nobody cared about you, after all.

Weeks pass.

Newcomers and rising thugs of all ages and sizes call her out and challenge her to fight, but are surprised when she merely just pushes them aside and continues on her way. Another city, another dead end. Another chance to find out why her father was murdered lost. A full month passes this way before she wakes up one day on the park bench she made as her bed and decided she was sick of all this, of the emptiness in her life, of all the grieving and the foot-dragging and the discombobulated melancholy that so pervaded her thoughts and life.

And it is coincidentally the same time at which she is jumped by the local delinquents as she passes through the less reputable sides of the town. They sally upon her, remembering only her recent aloof weakness of late, and surround her with their numbers, hoping to overwhelm her with their sheer presence and permanently put an end to her own.

But they forgot the rage festering deep in the bottom of her heart and the steely will that survived more than a few choice beatings, and before long, they are sent scattering as blood not her own leaves bodies. Her fists are cruel, showing less restraint than the Ryuuko of old- the Ryuuko unburnt by the fires- would have utilized, her mouth screaming the hellish song of her bitter sorrow. Later in the week, they submissively crawl back to her on bent hands and knees, sniveling like the dogs they were and mewling pitifully at her feet.

And just for the briefest of moments, she feels euphoric, to stand unbowed and unbroken, rising far above those that had looked down upon her all her life and lord over them, to have their unresisting bodies firmly crushed under the heels of the white sneakers she so favored.

So much glee runs through her then that she thinks it natural for her, something born from her blood or heredity, perhaps.

If she cannot be the best, she might as well be the worst.

Six months.

Six months after the fire, after everything in her admittedly shitty life had gone down the drain.

Was her search worth it?

Perhaps.

There were times when she thought different, however. The thoughts came in inopportune times, niggling at her mind in the dead of night and doing more than their fair share of work to ensure her sleeplessness. And shamefully, she agreed with them, thinking her efforts a waste of time.

After all, to what did she owe the man who had put less than minimal effort into raising her?

But as time passed, she realized that it wasn't just about finding out who killed him and why. It was about uncovering the truth, to find out who he was and why he did the things he did. To look past the surface and dive into the madness within, to jump down the throat of the beast that haunted her and tear its heart out with her very teeth. To understand him. To understand life itself.

She had injured many in her relentless quest for answers, forced squeaked tidbits from the mouths of those she pummeled into submission before her. Shaken them to the core and made them soil themselves in terror if so much as the whisper of her name or the rumor of her arrival reached their ears. And from their trembling lips and wavering voices, there was one common thread as of late.

A school located offshore, perched on a man-made island and crowned upon a sprawling city-state below.

Honnouji Academy.

She stands before the placid lake for what would be the last time in her life, pausing there the night before she is scheduled to be integrated within the system. Wistfully gazing at the tamed lands sprawling before her that served as her shelter over the seasons, she breathes the air in, noting the faint scents of human activity not too far away- food carts and stores and all. Suddenly at peace with herself, she kneels, scrutinizing her reflected features and frowning the slightest bit, looking for that spark of red life that teased her in its appearance from time to time and made her appearance cold and calculating. Frightening. Feral. Alien. Demonic.

The water ebbs and flows, and the calm surface is periodically disturbed by nature's symphony, concentric circles that ripple outward and turn her face into a parody, a monstrous caricature of itself before leaving it unblemished once more. She waits, intently searching with narrowed eyes. She knows that it comes at the least expected times, and especially when she was upset with the world at large.

One minute passes, then two.

Breathless, she laughs, falling back onto grass and staring at the placid sky above before contentedly sealing shut weary lids.

She can't find it.

After all this time, after everything she's gone through and everything she's done...

It's still her.

**Ich tu dir weh.
Tut mir nicht leid.**

(I hurt you.
I'm not sorry.)

The Gauntlet

Chapter Summary

Ryuuko and Satsuki renew an uneasy truce and prepare for the end of the world.

Chapter Notes

Torture and referenced/light molestation is present in this chapter. For those wishing to skip it, it is between the phrases "CRUNCH." and "Sigma is currently still located in...".

The Gauntlet- Final hurdle protagonists must pass through in a battle.
For the time skipping sections, the sequence is: 2, 4 + 5, 6, 1, 3, 7, 8.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

『どなかだむ』

(It is prudent to behave in an intelligent manner)

Long hair spilled over the other's breasts as the shorter of the two took measured steps, immense strength alien threads within her provided making hefting the other as easy as burdening a feather. Satsuki was bent over Ryuuko's shoulder like a sack of flour, stark naked with wounds crusted over and equally bare. Her bound wrists and ankles were snugly tied with gnarled rope, both sets of limbs dangling freely with each footfall. Bitter cold stung at her exposed flesh, threatening frostbite and and hypothermia with every passing second.

They're small potatoes, however, to the gauntlet set before them now.

Dead as a graveyard and as still as a statue, this place marked the fall of humanity. Wildlife markedly absent and falling snow all but obliterating any trace of the planet's natural soundtrack, it appeared as if time had frozen, or had simply forgotten this plane of existence entirely and moved on. The halls were equally lively, perfectly undisturbed save for rhythmic heel clicks muffled by soiled carpeting. Tapestries and paintings of former fancies on the walls, long immaculately kept and preserved over generations, lay moth-eaten and forgotten. Drapes are pulled back, displaying the world in all its dreary splendor. It is obvious that at least one person had taken an especially perverse interest in the view.

Satsuki frowns. No points for guessing the perpetrator's identity.

She could feel the threaded beings' attention focused upon her as Ryuuko turns a corner and weaves into common territory, eyeless gazes heated and piercing. The further she was dragged back into this nightmarish realm, the more they appeared, lining the walls and mutely observing the siblings. Like hyenas, they trailed after the duo, stalking behind with sights locked on the tasty little morsel tantalizingly brought close... So close...

She tried to sleep as they approached the manor's inner sanctum or at least feign unconsciousness, if only to keep in line with the image of her supposed defeat. But it is a futile endeavor - mind was filled with anxiety and body fed with a near-constant stream of heart-rushing adrenaline. She moves to adjust herself to a position where the stiff epaulettes decorating the younger's shoulders don't dig into her stomach as much, and is briefly shaken for her efforts, disguising her activities and fulfilling the intended act in one go.

Ragyou is pleased as her second daughter presents herself to the Kiryuuin matriarch, genuflecting and bowing her head in faux reverence. The elder helps herself to the first Kiryuuin sibling's bare body, gloating all the while. The younger hybrid's face is a blank slate, impassive to the comings and going-ons of the Kiryuuin household.

"Satsuki?"

"Completely disarmed."

"Her protectors?"

"Left for dead, or for consumption of clothing, whichever is sooner."

"The kamui?"

A low, sinister chuckle in place of a response, its tail end skipping three octaves in absolute merriment.

A set of fingers tamely weaved through dark strands of hair, parting bangs and ruffling them in a manner that would have been seen as appreciative by outsiders, affectionate even. But to Kiryuuin Ragyou, they were merely idle skintimate actions left to be perceived by the mindless as the highest form of praise. The petting of a slobbering beast for a job well done, a scruffy mutt wagging its tail at its master's touch in response, perhaps.

"My darling daughter... How loyal you've been to me. How wonderfully you've carried out my will, the will of the life fibers, the will of powers beyond our simple comprehension... And... you've even brought back a present. Nui was just telling me how much of a pain Satsuki was being lately..."

The elder's body is unceremoniously dumped on the ground at a silent gesture, left spread on her back.

"Satsuki," Ragyou whispered with glee, digging a long pointed nail into a particularly lengthy scab, twisting and burying it deep within the freshly reopened wound with sadistic

pleasure. “My foolish daughter, now brought to me and bound like the pigs she proclaimed others to be.”

A lesser human would have cried out in pain, would have thrashed with all the coordination of a squealing boar in its death throes. But she was Kiryuuin Satsuki, forged by the fires of fate and tempered by earthly trials and tribulations, something an alien abomination crafted by a cruel god-thing could never hope to understand. And so she merely grit her teeth and patiently bore the torture.

The digit is withdrawn after several repeated attempts to elicit a reaction, residual blood carelessly wiped on the defeated heiress’s cheek. Pointed keratin ink-quills draw scarlet designs with whatever sanguine liquid is left clinging to her claws, shaping crescent moons upon a backdrop of soft peach canvas. Rising with a quiet sigh, the Kiryuuin matriarch gestures to the white-clad girl with a singular finger twitch.

“Wake her.”

...

CRACK!

Frothy spit is forced from the eldest Kiryuuin sibling’s mouth as her body harshly collides against a concrete support column. She cannot help but cry out in agony as battered ribs shatter under the force, the strength of the brainwashed girl’s punt too much for it to withstand. Enamel clenches as she hisses in abject agony. Tears threaten to leak from her eyes, but she forbids them from doing so, calling upon her own inner strength to keep such a show of weakness at bay.

Click. Click. Click.

She hears that snake of a woman slither her way over to her, a sadistic smile plastered on her features.

“*Poor* Satsuki. Defeated by her own younger sibling, who stands by me where she should have always been from the beginning - at my side, serving under the great banner of the life fibers.”

Her view is roughly forced upward as well-maintained fingers grasp her chin and yank it so that predatory red meets steely blue. Satsuki maintains her resolute glare even as Ragyou’s darkens and the pressure on her lower jaw increases to almost unbearable thresholds.

Hesitant, the fiberborn approaches, briefly locking eyes with her blood-sibling as soft footsteps signal the entrance of several others.

It is only when Ragyou closes her eyes and soft lips part to allow fanged teeth to rest against the soft of her throat does Satsuki sneak a glance at the newcomers, finding among the faces two familiar and one exceedingly disturbing. She watches out of the corner of her eyes as Rei demurely steps away to speak to her superior, revealing the object of her interest for but a brief moment before a curtain of fair gold sweeps it away.

Aikiko took a glance at her counterpart and snorted derisively, choosing to depart instead of coming to stand beside her half-sister. Golden hair accentuates the dark glare that ashen gray skin bears as her form grows smaller and less detailed, her sneer so very much like the one Satsuki had previously donned during her reign as sovereign over Honnouji.

Nui skips past the retreating younger's disapproving form, gladly wrapping her arms around her soul-sister's waist and shooting daggers at the fallen dictator. Soft kisses lining the underside of her lips reward her endeavors, and she cranes her neck back, closing her singular eye in pleasure even as fangs sink into veins and leave love-tale trails of red in their path.

"A Kiryuuin that has become soft in the world..." Ragyou whispers, crouching by the fallen elder sibling and planting herself on the opposite side that Ryuuko and Nui occupied. "That Kiryuuin doesn't deserve to draw breath in this world... this world where the strong devour the weak and the humans that populate this planet are fit to become nothing more than sacrifices. Food offerings for the life fibers that rule above them all. That is the fate of this world, and the many worlds next in line."

Satisfied, she releases her hold, stepping back.

"Oh, Ryuuko?" she calls in her warm velvety tone, not bothering to take her eyes off the girl that lay sprawled before her. "Take Nui with you. Satsuki and I are going to have a... mother-daughter bonding moment."

The ruffle of crisp clothing fills the short silence between the women as Ryuuko disengages herself and bows low, briskly grinding on a heel soon after and padding away.

"You're going to die down here," Nui hisses jovially, barely restrained by the soft grip her soul-sister has on her wrist, whipping her head back as soon as the heat of Ryuuko's impatience lies squarely on her shoulders and skipping ahead of the intertwined duo. "I bet Lady Ragyou will have a *lot* of fun with you! Better start praying, *cherie*, because you're going to need all the precious little help you can get!"

It is only when the sound of clicking heels fades down the hall does Ragyou's teeth slide into her flesh, easily drawing blood from the veins placed low there. She winces, curling toes the slightest bit but making no other move.

"My daughter... my *foolish* daughter... Your little game of hide and seek and guerilla tactics has brought no end of amusement and headaches for me. But playtime is over. The end draws nigh, Satsuki, and your fate as an offering for Shinra Kouketsu is merely a step away."

That smirk again. That damned catlike grin that wore on the fraying nerves of her patience.

“Tch. Your arrogance assumes that Ryuuko won’t immediately vie for power once your distraction over conquering the world has clouded your mind - that is, assuming you keep her alive, as with all of your puppets.”

She chuckled heartily at the threat, lowering her voice so that the attending personal assistant could not hear her words.

“Ryuuko?” Ragyou hummed, feigning deep thought with naught but a finger to glossy lips. “Ryuuko has no place in the new world, as wonderfully bonded with the life fibers as she is. Neither does Nui, nor anyone else but I. We will all be joined together in this kamui, this god robe of mine that will surpass those ever constructed before. And with you here? Nothing can stop it. Not even those silly nudists Souichirou founded, or those little impertinent brats you call your loyal friends.

Oh! Speaking of them, how *sad* it must be for you. Their leader beaten, bound, and captured. A toy to be broken under my strength, and they don’t even attempt to come after you. You claim that unity is your greatest strength, the ultimate weapon against the life fibers. Ha! It is merely your weakness. This is the folly of humanity, Satsuki. The instinct of self-preservation, to sacrifice one of their own if it means the rest of the group gets to live for another day, even if the sacrifice is... *priceless*.”

She tapped the finger against plush lips, grinning impishly as cobalt eyes narrowed.

“Oh? Did you know? Your attempt at destroying the kamui has failed. Not only did Nui manage to repair the damage, you’ve merely inspired her to work faster. I must say, your ability to inspire others to a single-minded drive has proved itself quite useful to me.

But enough talk. Soon, you will see the full extent of your foolishness.”

A pair of perfectly manicured fingers is brought to wettened lips, and a low whistle trills through the air.

A moment passes. Then two.

Ryuuko soon arrives, prostrating herself once again before she who called her master. Pleased, a finger tics upward, the younger hybrid’s body following soon afterward like a puppet on strings. Syrupy-sweet, her voice breathes lightly in her youngest daughter’s ear, tickling thin tissue and bringing warmth to freezing flesh as those same fingers lightly scratch against a patient scalp.

“Ryuuko, darling. Show her to the... ‘guest’... room. Make sure she is comfortable.”

“Yes, mother,” Ryuuko utters in that usual gravelly tone of hers, snatching and dragging the elder Kiryuuin sibling away by the long strands of her silken hair.

“Be glad, Satsuki,” the director taunts as the pair is soon swallowed up by shadows, speaking in that infuriatingly coy voice of hers. “You’ll have a front row seat for the glorious rebirth of the world. And know that it is *all* thanks. To. **You**. You helped the spread of life fibers far more than I could ever have hoped for.”

Ryuuko hangs still in the middle of an empty steel-lined room, walls thick with reinforced metal. At first awakening, she had been angry, disoriented and plagued with half-formed thoughts and incomplete decisions. But she had thought better than to tear the entire construct down when her mind was wholly hers once more and freed from vestigial drug-induced stupors. Her senses stretched out instead, mapping out her surroundings in degrees, scouting and reporting back to her. And it worked beautifully, for she knew exactly where she was, and not just in the sense of immediate location.

Hm... The Naked Sol. Freshly repaired and once again seaworthy. Ragyou-worthy too, perhaps. And the dry dock these naked apes chose to make as their own...

Toukyou Bay, was it?

Quite fitting for these rats to keep scurrying back to their nest.

She admitted she suspected as much when she noticed roving bands of COVERS would mysteriously thin or disappear completely in that area. Whereas Ragyou would merely dismiss it as ‘the lowly exhibitionists’ final attempts at relevance before their ultimate destruction’, she had thought differently, believing them too incompetent to handle on their own.

How right she was.

She had been fully conscious for a while now, calmly “observing” the comings and goings of her prison without sight, for there is a thick band of material swathed over her eyes, making it all but impossible to see the world by any normal means. She hears the clatter of pots and pans from several decks below, the shouting of a Nudist leader, and the muffled conversations her dear sister has with those freakish pets of hers.

She doesn’t remember much of what happened over the last couple of hours. She remembered the very real feeling of alien sensations being forced upon her, of thousands of insects that swarmed upon her, biting at her with sharpened mandibles, piercing her skin with barbed stingers. The rest of it is a blurred jumbled mess. Shards of memories regarding the incident had hit her like pieces of broken glass, showing her images of what was and what used to be. Nothing could be clearly be divined from them, however, for all she sees is white and all she feels is soothing touches to her body within the void.

And then she sees something else. A parade of images. A film of sorts centered on her miserable life from such a young age. Abandoned as a young child and left to the care of

inattentive bumbling idiots and toughened by the tides of time, she remembered seeing herself crush hundreds under the might of her furious fists. One ill turn deserving another, and being dealt one more in karmic succession. And given the recent trauma of finding the very life she supposedly lived for an entire eighteen years was yet another complete lie, it was way too coincidental.

But this time, she believes them, if not with a few reservations. Previously found photographic evidence correlating with the visions she had proved much better than one with entirely no basis in reality, after all. She idly muses that the intermittent bursts of choleric rage were right after all. Her mother - if one with such dispositions could be deserving of such a title - was filth.

Filth that must pay for her crimes against her person with nothing but her life.

So. Matoi Ryuuko. Not *Kiryuuin* Ryuuko. **Matoi Ryuuko**. Dragon child. Fiber child. *Abandoned* child. Raised on a steady diet of rebellion and infighting and kicked out of the bousouzoku for the very same reason. Had her father murdered right before her eyes. Gained fame for being a nightmarish terror - the Kanto guitar case drifter.

And after that, it is all a hazy blur. She doesn't quite trust anything after that point, even if the short-haired girl that regularly tackled and dined and slept with her and claimed to be her best friend was a recurring theme in all of those recollections afterward. After all, if an entire life could be manufactured in a heartbeat with shibari-styled stringplay, a few scattered memories wouldn't be too much of a hassle to conjure up then, wouldn't it?

And if these new revelations turned out to be false and this entire thing another elaborate machination of some other miserable wretch pulling her strings?

Ryuuko can't quite find it in her to give a damn anymore.

...

...

...

Her nose itches.

She would have already moved to scratch it, but the heavy weights clamped about her wrists, ankles, and just about almost everywhere else tell her that she has been restrained with steel shackles at the very least. They seem unnatural for their current purpose- too large and heavy, if the joints on the cusp of being pulled out of their sockets had anything to say about that. A

solid metal band had also been outfitted around her neck as if it were a mere dog collar, tethered to at least three walls at separate points. Multiple needles lined her spine, chemicals meant to subdue her life fibers instead burning skin and leaving ugly reddened welts behind.

Her frown deepens, and the awakening kamui's sentiments synchronize with her own, a low angry chatter resonating in the back of her mind and staining the otherwise pleasurable buzz titillating her senses.

How *demeaning*.

She had amused herself with the idea of breaking free, stalking upstairs, and violently goring the persons responsible before leaving them to bleed to death. And it was a rather difficult decision to make, honestly. After all, with the knowledge that her mother cared little for her and saw her as yet another pawn to move on a universe-sized chessboard, there was nothing to hold her back and allow herself the brief indulgence of creating a new bloody form of art and proudly displaying a museum's worth of showcases upon the blank canvas this world provided.

But...

Something inside pulls at her, nagging at her mind relentlessly and quieting her violent spirit with pillow-soft touches only a fellow wounded soul could execute. And it felt... wonderful. As if it were herself mirrored, but made differently enough so as to not mimic her fate completely. Someone who had been faced with stigmatization and endless days of being looked down upon, used and discarded afterward like trash. So she decided to wait a little longer, just until this annoying sensation went away. A few days certainly wouldn't kill her, after all.

Her mouth is dry and cottony, and her head feels as if it had been hammered three hundred times over with a white-hot ice pick. And yet in the hour - yes, hour; she counted the seconds - she'd been stuck down here, nobody was sent to check on her or relieve her.

How considerate of them.

She'd make sure that their terrified wails and the screams of their dying comrades would be the last thing they'd hear.

There is a hoarse screeching of metal alike nails on a chalkboard and an answering gnashing of fanged teeth as the hatch leading towards her cell opens. A patter of feet nervously head towards her, hesitant and halting in nature. Curious, Ryuuko remains perfectly still, enticing this newcomer closer with feigned unconsciousness - faux submissiveness at the very least.

Twitching ears pick up faster-than-normal footsteps and the soft '*paf paf paf*' of ruffling cloth. A short person, then, given that they needed to walk faster to compensate for their lack of height. Light on their feet as well, given the lack of clomping around like a herd of elephants on their part. An alabaster nose surreptitiously lifts into the air, inhaling deeply.

Vegetable oil, and quite a bit of it as well.

...

The vague odor of fish, and the stomach-churning greasy aroma of fried foodstuff. Skipping feet.

She smirks to herself.

Ah. The “best friend” and the impure god robe. How quaint.

And just to see if her assumption was correct, she waits a little while longer. Time was of the essence for them but a mere plaything for her - nothing she couldn't afford to waste a few minutes of.

“Don't worry, Senketsu-chan!” she hears her shout-whisper in excitement. “I'm sure she'll be just as happy to see you!”

Metallic clacks and the grinding of something heavy across the floor punctuated the girl's statement. She cannot help but cock her head slightly at that.

Oh?

She hears a shuffling of clothes, ears twitching as something stops before her and a metallic scraping soon fills the silent void between them. A hearty scent soon fills her senses, saturating the air with a familiar aroma. Unbidden, she salivates. A spoon is soon brought to dry lips, but no tongue darts forward to lap at the liquid or otherwise allow it entry. Instead, she turns her head away, refusing to even taste it. This does little to discourage her visitor, however.

“Oh! Maybe Ryuuko-chan is uncomfortable?”

She hears a light flutter, and soon the sensation of something heavy hits her.

Well, not exactly her person. Rather it is squarely resting on the chains that bind her, forcing her limbs and neck to pull uncomfortably. An irate snarl manages to escape her throat before she can suppress it, but dissuasion is not a concept for a doctor's daughter, who continues her task of climbing onto the girl.

Soft hands brush against her, dangerously close to waiting teeth and lightly stroking past sensitive ears in their path to wrap themselves around the back of her head. There is a short bout of fumbling, and a low murmur. And just like magic, the cloth falls from her eyes a short while later and her sight is restored, birthing a world of pain to dilating orbs.

She hisses, squeezing shut pinprick sangria points and swaying her head to and fro like a serpent long suffering of a questing stick prodding against it. Chains pulling at her limbs

strain further as *someone* decides to treat her like a springboard and land safely a little while away.

“Much better!” the no-star chirps, smiling brightly and offering her the overflowing soup spoon once more, the pool of water reflecting her shocked, slightly-annoyed expression within its ceramic cradle.

And just to humor her, she cranes her head forward as much as the glorified dog collar will allow her and sips, allowing it to flood her mouth and burn delicate tissues raw. The miso is over salted and gritty in texture, slightly sour and filled with random assortments of dried vegetation with little rhyme or reason to their inclusion - the product of rapidly dwindling supplies within a doomed world.

She nods vigorously in approval as Ryuuko continues to drink, feeding her bites of croquettes in between. Eventually, she stops, letting the girl balance the utensil in her mouth while whipping a rather impressively-sized bottle out from one of her hammerspace pouches lining her Nudist uniform. With a frenzy of movements, she crushes the entire container’s contents and dumps it into a liter of water, violently shaking it and frothing its contents. Before the red-streaked delinquent could react, it is shoved in her mouth, the brunette beaming all the while as Ryuuko flailed in shock and gagged as the soup spoon was swallowed and liquid unwittingly went into her airway.

“You need to get your iron up after blood loss! Water too!” she chirps helpfully, not bothered in the slightest that the other was actually *drowning* on land.

Water sloshes everywhere as Ryuuko hurriedly slackens her jaw and tips her head forward far enough to dislodge the plastic’s neck from her throat. Mako ducks under the chains, helpfully slamming her open palm against the delinquent’s back with the surprising force of a hurricane. Once all is said and done and the last globule of regurgitated water is cleared from her windpipe, the coconut-haired girl seizes hold of the black kamui and brings him closer to the panting, heavily wheezing girl, a hopeful smile ever-present on her face.

“I brought Senketsu-chan as well!”

Fiery orbs glare from underneath a ragged mane.

Ah. ***Senketsu.***

Her head moves to the side as he is forcefully brought into view by the overexcited human being, sandwiched between her eager arms and making an easy escape impossible. The kamui looks hesitant in approaching her and even wriggles a bit against his captor in vain, knowing the chains that bound her might as well have been made out of air. Mako knows nothing of her true strength, nor does she think anything of the restraints that tethered her to that singular position. Her ignorance was her saving grace, and her single-minded dedication to saving all that mattered was unmatched by others, even Satsuki herself.

Steel jingles and strains as she leans toward the dark cloth and slowly grins, savoring his expression and relishing in his unbridled terror. A similar metallic orchestral accompaniment follows soon after as she extends a hand to him, quirking a bared finger in his direction.

The siren's call of her blood pounds in his very drying fibers, attention trained solely on the little piece of heaven so tantalizingly close, hovering right before his very being. He pulls forward, Mako's dirt-caked shoes kicking up dust long resting upon the steel-gray floor. Before he knows it, he suddenly is close- *way too close for comfort* - and he immediately jerks backward to signal the no-star to stop, fearing a trap. But... when he opens his mouth to protest against further intrusion, the digit unwittingly slides between his teeth, soft flesh easily being sandwiched by four points. Unable to flee, he hovers his fangs over the exposed digit, singular rust-colored eye flicking to piercing sangria ones in a silent ask for permission. Seeing her remain still and docile, he divines her acceptance and uneasily sinks his teeth into her flesh, instantly and richly rewarded for his daring.

Her blood surges through his body, and euphoria wildly shoots through his being like electricity. His body stiffens and gives a little jerk that almost completely pulls his body from the no-star's embrace as the life-essence of his chosen wearer races through his fibers. It is made all the more sweeter with Junketsu's influence - absolute bliss coursing through her system at all times - and he willingly drinks it all in, pushing pointed teeth deeper. The taste, the sensation of being one with her again- it's almost too overwhelming to take in all at once! Waves of navy stretch across creamy beige, spreading across her extended hand and slipping under ivory white in desperate attempts to become closer, to be more than woven cloth lying on her skin. How terrible it was for him! The only person that could truly relate to him, and he was denied even that by virtue of the parasitic nature of his kind forced upon her in the form of militaristic dress-uniform.

He heard it all, he listened to their conversation while she slept. Her bond with that monster was strong enough to fairly withstand any type of invasive surgery that would lead to its removal; you might as well just rip her entire spinal column out and just call it a day rather than spend thousands of hours picking apart its life fibers from her nerves!

But those troubles seem so far away, distant as the next century and drowned by roaring tides of joyful red.

Ryuuko was here!

She was here! All around him and in him! And she didn't want to kill him anymore!

Like an infant cradling a warm bottle and nursing from it, he wraps his cuffs around her hand and brings his mouth closer, suckling intermittently. The god robe protests loudly as she lifts the digit and slips the rest of his body out of the no-star's grasp, clinging that much more tighter and only relaxing when he realizes her intention was only to bring him to rest upon the cross-linked chains. Snuggling against her familiar warmth, he closes his lone eye in pleasure and continues to feed, feeling her very being ripple as heartbeat vibrations pulse in his core.

In the midst of the low growled tones, he hears a familiar crooning note that soothes and excites him all at once. Her voice, not as the one filled with bloodlust and hatred, sounded as if she had rusted nails in her throat. His lapels twitch in anticipation.

"I... know you."

“Eh?” Senketsu momentarily pauses, jaw slackening and bleeding finger falling from his lips.

“I know you,” she repeats once more, furrowing her brows in concentration.

Her mouth moves slowly, and she speaks just as fast, tasting his name, experimentally sounding out the syllables one by one.

“Sen-ket-su.”

He immediately leaps down and, wrapping his cuffs around her stomach, weeps with joy, thoroughly soaking her front with a torrent of tears within seconds.

‘Senketsu,’ she said! Not ‘dishrag’, not ‘ugly’, but **Senketsu**!

“Oh, Ryuuko,” he sobs in relief. “Ryuukooo~!”

A hum of amusement and a twitch of chapped lips upward precedes a partially memorized passage stolen from aging journals.

“Experimental kamui. Class H. Designation #25. Synthesized artificially with spliced DNA extracted from my spinal fluid, I believe. Created within the last year by Matoi Isshin... My father... and designed to be an efficient means to... *crush* all those that stood in my way.”

“Neh!”

Mako suddenly appeared before them, hugging the kamui fiercely as the poor god robe was unceremoniously yanked from his former partner and left with sleeves outstretched and tears pouring from his singular eye.

“Senketsu is more than a weapon! I saw him! He was your friend! And I’m your friend as well! He was close to you, like two peas in a pod! I didn’t understand it when you kept speaking to him when you ironed or washed him, or when you talked to your boobs while fighting Lady Satsuki... but living with him, I finally understand! He’s like you! And me! He’s like another person, with likes and dislikes! Like how he hates it when I got croquettes on him by accident and he had to be pried from Guts’ mouth, or when mom had to wash him... and how he likes it when I use fabric softener and tuck him in bed at night when Lady Satsuki isn’t wearing him...

Neh! No matter what happens! I promised to stick by you forever and ever, even when Lady Satsuki says that you’re sewn onto Junketsu forever and ever and can’t be removed from it without dying from blood loss! Not even when she says you’re not Ryuuko and never will be! Because what Ryuuko sets her mind to, Ryuuko will win! Especially at friendship! Because she won at friendship, she won at life!”

Her easy grin slips a little, and the infuriatingly biting bile that’s been stewing in her thoughts all this time - the stabbing knife of despair so easily penetrating her flesh and jamming itself in her heart - finally gains a voice. Her tongue betrays her, responding without thought. Red eyes widen as long-repressed words spill out, owner helpless to stop them.

“But I’m *not* Ryuuko. At least, not the Ryuuko you remember.”

For that, her suspended body is violently wracked as Mako shakes her, a look of unadulterated determination set upon her face.

“That’s not true!”

“Eh?”

“Because you haven’t tried to hurt me at all! Because you remember Senketsu! Because I know that Ryuuko’s still Ryuuko, even when she’s not! And he’s still your friend! And I’m still your friend too, Ryuuko!

My dad said! He said when he was stealing blood from a patient, ‘Mako, friendship is like an open wound! Everyone can see that you’re bleeding, but only you can enjoy the warmth it provides!’ And then, ‘Mako, have you seen the rice cooker?’, and ‘friendship is raising your hand touching other people’s hearts... and then selling it on the black market so it can be shared with others!’

And he was right! Friendship is like bleeding to death and wasting blood we can sell on the market if it makes you warm, or like needing a rice cooker after touching lives! Because friendship is important! And so are you, Ryuuko!”

By now, her smile has completely faded, a rare expression of contemplation taking its stead. There was that absolutely **disgusting** feeling again, the feeling of warm *familiarity* and a burning need to put this girl standing before her now in a loving embrace. An irresistible urge to give herself to protect this girl, this imagawayaki too good for this world, too pure.

She cannot place her trust in any of the so-called memories after that what her father had documented. Even the violent memories of his death is doubted.

And yet...

Surely the one standing before her lacked the capacity to lie - at least make an adequate one that wouldn’t be seen through like the shower curtains those three perverts viewed her through whenever she decided to wash up- Wait...

She could use her.

Explore the past. Draw a solid line between who she needed to kill immediately and who she could just drag their deaths out in slow torturous rituals. If what she said was true, then it would align almost perfectly with the memories she already had. What else was there to lose?

Ryuuko bows her head and puts on the most demure, world-weary look she can muster. “But...” she lies, “I don’t remember you at all.”

Mako gasps, tiny hands slapping against comically huge puffed cheeks and Senketsu sent tumbling facedown to the floor completely by accident.

“Ryuuko-chan doesn’t remember Mako!?”

A jerking twitch of the taller girl’s head prompts her to scoot closer. An innocent smile billions of watts bright stretches across her eager face.

“Mako will have to help you remember, then!”

Ryuuko relaxes, allowing the kamui to free itself from its acquaintance with the ship deck and climb the dangling chain to rest atop her head. It was almost *too* easy. Suppressing a wolfish grin, she continues, letting only the divine garment bound to her glean true intents and purposes lying underneath. Her head cocks far to the side, adding to her disarming appearance.

“Then... tell me. Everything. From the beginning, to the end.”

CRUNCH.

“Augh!”

Spider-web impressions blossoming on a wall. The soft ‘thump’ of a body hitting the floor for the thousandth time that day, each impact ceasing to diminish in neither strength nor in vicious ferocity. The muted clack of worn white heels and a satin-soft sultry voice paired together. A tall woman in equally colorless clothing inspecting her nails, idly using one to scrape unidentifiable contents out from below another as her bound daughter bleeds at her feet, fibers tightly cast around her neck like a vice.

“Yes, Satsuki. This is where *you* **belong**. At my feet, bowing to me.”

The splatter of red casts arcs on ivory white as the younger woman’s body is flung away once more with naught but a casual wrist flick, rolling to a stop near her younger sister’s white thigh-high boots. She is dragged back by a vice-like grip on her ankles, wounds reopening and naked front harshly burning from the carpet’s sandpaper-rough abrasion. A hand finds its way to rest upon her butt, nails digging in and burying themselves below the skin.

“Such soft flesh... easily crushed by my hand... You are but a mere human Satsuki, powerless to stand against me without your foolish group and those nudists. What hope do you have, even if you had all the strength of the world behind you?”

Ebony strands scatter as their owner is suddenly launched up and away, forced against a wall. Hands that have wronged thousands and thousands more press upon her sides, effectively trapping her from all angles. Cobalt eyes narrowed and teeth grit with the strength of a hundred titans. Bruised and battered muscles visibly tensed, mind drawing from years of unfortunate experiences to mentally steel itself for whatever this devil-woman was planning

to do with her next. As if reading her mind, the elder chuckled low and hauntingly, each breathy sound sending a racing chill up her spine.

“Oh? What’s this? I finally get a response from the *great* Kiryuuin Satsuki? ...Don’t you worry. *I’m* not going to do anything to you,” Ragyou snickers, straightening up and gesturing with a curling finger once more.

Ryuuko steps behind her mother not a moment later, face expressing nothing but a glazed, thoughtless expression.

“Ryuuko is.”

Satsuki’s eyes widened the slightest bit as the CEO’s fingers snapped, and Ryuuko suddenly is before her, arms wrapped around her midsection and kamui-clothed front pressed against her bared own.

“Ryuuko, dear. Show her how glorious your kamui- no, the life fibers- feel when one submits to their will.”

Nips surprisingly soft for canines sharper than an assassin’s dagger trailed along the edges of her neck between butterfly kisses, and the elder god-woman laughed gleefully at the display. Shut eyes betray nothing as the shortest of the three obediently carries out the task set out before her, shoving her crown under the elder sibling’s chin in between halting breaths and resting her palms on the other’s biceps, suckling at the space where neck met shoulder.

“Isn’t this what you wanted, Satsuki *dear* ? To finally be reunited with your darling little sister that you had wasted thirteen years of your life attempting to avenge?”

Satsuki is made to sit on her butt, unresistant form placed ungracefully between the younger’s spread legs with Ryuuko’s draped over her own. A firm grip latches onto her hair and lightly tugs at it like horse harnesses, making turning her head away from her brainwashed sibling as impossible of a task as selecting a specific grain of sand from the shore. Bites are traded for questing kisses along the bottom of her jaw, tracing up past her cheeks, and stopping dead center upon a closed eyelid.

Satsuki grimaced. Twisted forms of ‘love’ from her mother she could withstand and even ignore with a steady peace of mind, but shutting out those coming from her sister with the same finesse?

Her blood boils underneath a calm visage, anger screaming through pulsing veins as Ryuuko’s teeth nip at her bottom lip, fang catching onto paper-thin skin and drawing a small bead of blood there. She kisses Satsuki then, tongue briefly sliding over bleeding lip before slipping into the other’s mouth and forcing the elder to taste her own coppery essence. Ryuuko grows bolder then, shifting so that her weight lies almost entirely on the ex-President’s body. Their kiss deepens, the ex-delinquent pulling at the gnarled strands of dark knee-length tresses and looping her free arm around the taller girl’s back.

The rainbow-haired businesswoman hoots jovially at the sight, clasping her hands and lacing perfectly manicured fingers. “You know... they say that even the most stubborn of people

can be broken in time... with *love*. ...Perhaps it is not mine that is suited for you but instead your sister's!"

Ryuuko pulls away and gently laps at the bleeding marks left by her ministrations, drinking blood so freshly tainted with her own. Ragyou lets her chin rest on a bed of slender fingers, cupping the bony flesh with a mere curl of digits. A wicked grin splits her face in half, the corners of thin lips seeming to reach her eyes.

"But... perhaps you would prefer it better if it was the real Ryuuko who was tending to your needs... Perhaps I can loosen dear Nui's stitching for a while, and let her mind free while her body continues this marvelous act of hers..."

Dark spindle shaped eyebrows lightly furrowed, and the firstborn couldn't help but visibly snarl at the thought. Although on the outside, it appeared that only a lip corner had twitched the slightest bit and the rest of her facade maintained its otherwise stoic appearance, Ragyou took it at face value and basked in its venomous presence.

"Oho? Are my words finally getting through to you?"

The CEO bends at the waist, pushing Ryuuko's head off to the side and making sure to press her forehead against her other daughter's for the briefest of moments, all but ensuring they both lock their eyes together in silent combat.

A hissing whisper breathes nightmares to life one after the other, a morbid parade. "Imagine how broken she'll be... How she'll be forced to act out her dear older sister's nightmare, and be *completely* helpless to stop it. How she'll be the one that did it, over and over again. Not me. Not Nui. But herself, with her own hands. Perhaps..."

Fair hands guide rough and calloused ones to rest over the elder sibling's abdomen, the director grinning as the fiberborn understands immediately and focuses her attention there.

"Perhaps I'll even let you two live, just so she can do it for my amusement. Over. And over. And over again. Until maybe one, or both of you, break."

The words of famous generals of old shout in her ear then, filling her mind with tactical schemes and easily drowning out honeyed words of rancor. A welcome distraction, she lets them fill her brain, pushing away the woman's toxic influences and steeling her mind. Feign disorder. When the enemy becomes arrogant and presses their attack, surround and crush them without mercy. Let her have her fifteen minutes of glory now, and when she thinks that you have finally broken, when you have finally ceded to her ideals and abandoned all hope, tear her down for all to see without mercy.

Eagle-sharp eyes quickly scan the room, coming to rest solidly upon the closest thing in the vicinity to which to enact her plan upon. Scenarios are parsed, complications filtered, and the best course of action chosen for use of said object.

Ryuuko...

A hand extended and grasped blue-lined boots, halting midway down the younger's calf and squeezing solidly. Deadened garnet flicked to meet oxford in mute surprise, all reactionary movements suppressed out of necessity. She notices how gear-shaped pupils shift as understanding passes between them like water down a stream, and lids blink in rapid succession to convey their master's understanding.

She calls her sister's name once. Twice, trembling slightly as the younger pulled away and roughly slid the back of a hand down her side for added effect.

"Matoi..."

She pauses, recalculating her odds as Ragyou frowns and suspiciously glowers underneath furrowed brows. Had her ploy been seen through that quickly!?

She waits, baited breath caught in her throat and burning her lungs.

No... it was working just fine. She just needed to sound weaker. More hoarse and fragile, as raspy as the voice of a man who had been stranded in the desert for days on end. Wetting her lips, she tries again.

"Matoi... snap out of it... Don't you realize... that Ragyou is merely controlling you...?"

Ragyou cackles, sidling up against the youngest daughter and roughly yanking Ryuuko back by the lengthening strands of her hair. The short-haired delinquent wordlessly tumbles off of her sibling, landing at the eldest's feet in a sprawling heap on her butt.

"Appealing to her emotions? Foolishness. Such foolishness. I expected better from the fruit of my loins, but... I suppose you're the *true* runt of the litter."

Long nails sharpened into the shape of talons grasps Ryuuko's chin fiercely, and the brainwashed girl obeys her mother's touch, relaxing every fiber in her body and allowing herself to be brought up to the elder's level. An empty face with emptier eyes calmly stared back at hawkish ones.

A low hiss of sadistic glee. "See this?"

Three claws rake across the shorter girl's flesh, leaving behind deep gouges and crescent moon trails of drying blood that heal soon after, but not quite completely.

"See how docile she is?"

A slap of flesh on flesh. Once. Twice. Four, six, ten times. Reddening, gouged cheeks that rival cherries in color as liquid vigor is brought to the surface. A wheezing choke as fingers infused with crushing titanic strength wrap around a soft neck, ruthlessly squeezing until nothing but weak gasping sounds fill the air. Ryuuko's face colors, eyes rolling to the back of her head as a sick blue pigmentation replaces that of healthy peach. Fingers twitch as her vision starts to fade and she is lifted clear off the ground, but no move is made to free herself.

"See how she bends to my command? How she doesn't fight back?"

A fist darting faster than a hummingbird's wings brings the kamui clad girl to her knees, clawed hold finally releasing its prey. The hybrid curls into a half-ball on the floor, feebly gasping for breath with shaking arms wrapped around an injured abdomen.

"Humans were made to be broken."

Another punch, this time an uppercut to her bleeding chin. Then a kick to her side, knocking against a tender solar plexus.

"Humans were made to serve life fibers. Nothing more, nothing less. This is the glory that *all* of mankind was destined for! The idea of freedom is merely an illusion that humans have adopted in order to seem better than their superiors - a delusion many have rebelliously adopted when faced with the truth, the truth that all of humanity is no better than the mere ant crawling on the ground!"

Clack!

Jaws snapping shut upon impact. A sharp crack as bone breaks and reforms. A stifled ragged cry of agony, betrayed only by the slight watering of sangria orbs beneath a ruffled mane. Ragyou's voice drops, speech becoming siballent.

"A delusion... that I aim to *destroy*, when I don the glory that is the ultimate god robe."

Ryuuko is dragged by the scruff of her neck and forced to lie still in front of Satsuki, the heel of Ragyou's shoe pushing her face into the dirt.

"How can *you* hope to rescue her in such a state like this? You couldn't even save yourself."

Well-groomed hands quirk two fingers upward, and Ryuuko slowly rolls out from under her, obeying the unspoken command by punching herself in the face, then attacking every square inch of her visible flesh with teeth and chewed nails.

"And if you can't do such a small thing..."

A triumphant sneer. Perfectly filed and shaped fingers primed and resting on each other once more.

"...What hope do you have in extending such a gesture to the entirety of the world?"

Snap.

CLUNK.

SHICK.

The familiar scissor sword unfolded before her, its tip dangerously angled at the elder sibling's jugular. With yet another simple finger snap from the REVOCS head, the grip is reversed, and the scissor half plunges into its wielder's flesh, cutting deep and drawing ruby red lines. The mauling continues long after the command is issued, and the Kiryuuin matriarch takes perverse pleasure in the pained panting and groans her second-born makes, only bothering to issue a stopping order when the bloodbath reaches dangerous levels and threatens to soak everything in the immediate vicinity with a shower of scarlet.

A hand snatches at the youngest's nape once more and dangles her submissive form above the stunned elder sibling, fat droplets of blood wicking from weeping wounds to rain down while she can only manage to look up in concealed horror. Dropping the hybrid and forcing her onto her knees, a gentle squeeze of wrists sends the scissor blade falling from a loosened grip soon afterward. Slender forearms drape over Junketsu's epaulettes, crossing over at the wrists and resting upon the kamui's silken lapels, nestling a pointed chin upon an untamed navy mane. She squeezes supple rounded flesh underneath, perverse chuckles accentuating her invading touch.

"Do you see this?" she whispers, soft hands further snaking down Ryuuko's front to gently grasp at the hybrid's own. A long claw traces the scissor blade-born ridges and valleys, stopping dead center. "See how dedicated she is? She carved this here for me. 'Kiryuuin Ryuuko', underneath stars forsaking her humanity. A show of adoration perhaps, and an amusing one as well."

Smugly, she waved Ryuuko's unresisting limbs in her bushy-browed face, making sure to accentuate the ten hewn cross-marks aligning the two iterations of the characters. Fair hands slide up the younger's arms once more, pressing in three razor-sharp needles and allowing the white cloth to run red with fresh blood once more.

Snap crackle in succession as the woman's claws drop their payload and roughly forced the smaller chimera's chin upward as far as flexing tendons and creaking bones would allow, the other hand tracing a path down the transforming younger's throat as cloth expanded, becoming sleeker and covering all that it touched. A final snap of her fingers replaces a demure daughter with a crazed one, a sadistic grin plastered fresh on her face and a loving look all but cemented deep within her eyes as she gazes upon her would-be rescuer.

Ragyou's voice drops low, a white-clad body smoothly stepping away in a singular swishing motion.

"Attack."

A sharp kiai joins a whipping leg jarring against cracked and shattered ribs. Long strands of ebony fly, arcing in a single black wave as ragged cries of anguish escape their master's throat. Crescent kick to the left. Roundhouse to the right. Fore-knuckle strike to the jaw. Front stomp to the sternum. Shuto to the neck. Wrist secured and crushed almost to near-

breaking point. Body straddled, arm painfully twisted behind her back, a hand raised to deliver the finishing blow to the rear of her opponent's skull.

CLACK!

Without warning, Ryuuko suddenly stiffens and drops back to her knees away from the twitching girl at the sound of the finger snap, head bowed and body encased in another small shower of blue stars as kamui and wearer desynchronize. Smug, Ragyou strides over, sliding a finger against the soft of her jaw on her way past.

“See how she completely submits to my will unquestioningly, even without speech?”

White heels roll a defenseless Satsuki onto her back and clawed hands yank her up by her hair, where she glares at the director with as much hate as her half-lidded eyes can muster, a hand weakly gripping onto the other's bicep for support.

“This is more than just simple mind stitching, my *dear daughter*. Remember that I have more than just the mind than to toy with. You will need something more than a few words to even *remotely* break my grip on her.”

With that, she releases her iron grip and leaves the two to their own devices, heavy doors slamming shut and tumblers securely locking the room behind clicking heels.

Satsuki breathes heavily, struggling to even crawl over to where her little sister still knelt, arms dangling limply at her sides and messy bangs overshadowing her bowed head. A muted whimper is made when fingers accidentally brushed against visibly bruising spots just barely hidden under the original godrobe's two-colored collar. Tilting the younger's head up with a hooked finger under a bony jaw in an exponentially gentler rendition of how their mutual tormentor performed the act, she impassively gazed into her sister's eyes, trying to discern a reaction - any reaction at all, really - from within glazed and vacant orbs. For a second, Satsuki could have sworn that a fire burned in its depths, stoked by actions of late and uncontrollably whipping into a burning inferno. Then, it is gone, and an eerily tranquil response takes its place, a calm visage of peace that raises hairs lining the elder's nape.

It's the face of a cold blooded serial murderer who had just caught sight of their latest victim.

Her gaze scrutinizes it further, noting a cunning gleam with killing intent reflected within burgundy and mustard eyes below, slyly displaying to its former owner what its current one could not. Far more calculating and unpredictable than anything else she had dealt with, one could only imagine what the words and lies it was speaking to its pair-bond at the moment.

It unnerves her.

“Sigma is currently still located in the cargo hold, no sign of movement on her end. Alpha and Beta are on standby, and their positions are confirmed with the recent radio transmission I obtained from the package delivery. Omega should be arriving from the main deck in a couple of seconds. I’m not sure where Theta is, but I assume she’s with Tau, given her annoying personality and being that he’s the only one outside of the Mankanshokus that adequately tolerates her nonsense.”

“Idiot dog! Why do you always have to make things so complicated!? Why can’t we just label them as- !”

“Ahem.”

“Lady Satsuki!”

A blurred rush of pink and blue blitz past the electrical panels as the two devas snap to attention, saluting their commander with a curled fist placed across their chests.

“Good afternoon, Inumuta, Jakuzure. I trust either of you wouldn’t have known where Senketsu has gone off to?”

Blue ridged glasses are pushed up the nose bridge in surprise, free hand already moving to scroll through the deck cams. “My lady, you allowed him to roam the ship on his own?”

“No. I informed him to stay within the room as I finished preparations. I assume he was as stubborn as Ryuuko and wandered off, or was discovered and taken away by another party.”

“Just a minute. Changing cameras. Switching from primary feed to- ... oh...”

“Report.”

In lieu of a vocal response, a cascade of key clacking brought the live feed to the large monitors mounted to the steel deck ceiling. At its sight, the thick lines delineating the former dictator’s brows creasing upward.

“What’s this?”

Grainy images that jumped and lagged displayed Ryuuko and Mako face to face with each other, just talking while a content Senketsu rests himself upon her head, comfortably nestled between the twin horned crown that Junketsu’s apparel came with. From what she could see from the unfortunately-placed overhead angle on the bulkhead the camera was tethered to, the latter was animatedly talking to the former, never hesitating to contort her body in impossible shapes and positions to fully maximize the effects her speeches had while the other two looked on. Satsuki notes that not one iota of visible hostility was detected in their interactions and an unparalleled cordiality was sparked between the trio, a fact that piques her interest.

Curious indeed.

“My apologies, Lady Satsuki, but audio feed is currently down- .”

A hand cutting through the air dismisses his concerns. “No matter. I was on my way to visit Matoi anyway if Senketsu couldn’t be found. How fortunate that they made it easier.”

Blue and pink turn back in surprise as the door’s metallic scraping assaults their ears once more. Nonon speaks.

“You wouldn’t have happened to have... foreseen and planned this encounter with the transfer student... in any sort of way would you, Lady Satsuki? It is not... I don't doubt your decision in housing this delinquent transfer with us, or letting her stay here, but... letting the transfer's kamui within tearing distance of her...?”

She pauses, angling her head so that glowing neon lights reflecting off wall-to-wall screens catches glimmering cobalt eyes.

"I trust Senketsu to bring out in Ryuuko what I have failed to do. I understand now the limitless amount trust he and Ryuuko had. There are... things that admittedly even I cannot accomplish. This is just one of those times, and I have accepted it as part of my shortcomings in dealing with her."

Nonon stares, left completely speechless and slack-jawed at their leader's sudden departure from the usual steely persona. Did Satsuki just...?

A hesitant voice quiets out, "Lady Satsuki?"

They never do see the small understanding smile that graces their commander’s face as she wordlessly leaves, a confused silence following in her wake.

“... and they even gave you a nickname and created a fighting style after you! Fist of the No-Star! Because you managed to fight Fukuroda-senpai and won! And they gave me a nickname too! One Punch Mankanshoku! And I’m really sorry about the club, by the way, but we fought each other and I loved that we finally had a working shower and electricity, and that we were consumed by the happiness the two-star life brought me and I’m sorry and-!”

She is cut off as the scraping of metal fills the room. Satsuki pushes open the metal hatch and coolly approaches the three, stopping just short of her sister’s bound form with the ever-present disapproving frown on her face. Ryuuko scowls and matches her stare, fearlessly glaring back. For a moment, she thinks of turning her head to her and pointedly ignoring her presence until she decided that the woman before her was even remotely worth her time, but even a back can be revealing, especially with a no-star splayed before her and a god robe currently curled against her like a cat.

Satsuki decides to humor her.

“The longer we sit here and idle what little time we have, the larger the threat of Nui finding us and... jumping to the wrong conclusions about where *you* grows.”

“The tracker,” Ryuuko realizes, hairs unconsciously rising along her nape and fingers twitching in response. Metal clinks as an arm unconsciously tries to bring closer to her scuff, unceremoniously halted prematurely by binds forgotten in her haste.

Satsuki waves her concerns off with a quick, efficient hand gesture.

“No need to worry. It has since been removed. You are free to come and go as you please.”

Ryuuko snarled. “You brought me here. Why?”

“Merely to speak with you on hospitable terms, without the threat of intervention or your person being punished. I- ”

“Ah. So this is the hospitality of the great Kiryuuin Satsuki. I feel *so* welcomed,” Ryuuko interrupts, sniggering at her own joke.

“In any case, I doubt Harime has left out the details of your sudden entrance back there, and the director will seek compensation... maybe even question where your loyalties lie and redouble her efforts, maybe resorting to making you a simple mind-stitched puppet of hers and robbing you of your freshly gained awareness.”

Ryuuko hums, considering. “Heh. I’m in a good mood lately, so you got yourself a minute or two to explain your shit before I rail every single person on this ship.”

Satsuki turns slightly. “I’ll notify Mr. Kinagase to release you of your bonds. After all, it was on his insistence that we restrict you in this manner.”

“Don’t bother,” she replied calmly, gently tugging on the chains binding her.

The plethora of metal plates buckle, and then free themselves completely from the walling with another leisurely pull, skittering across the flooring. Mako’s eyes bulge. Satsuki’s eyebrow merely quirks. Gently, she wraps her now-free hand around the other wrist’s cuffs, crushing the constricting metal into bite-sized fragments and freeing her hand in one go. The process is repeated for the remainder of the many restraints that graced her form, ending with the collar encircling her neck. She drops, landing in a crouch and shaking the ship to its very supports upon impact.

Ryuuko stands, arching her back and sighing contentedly when a series of crackling pops answer her efforts to straighten it out. And just to allay her vestigial concerns, a finger jams in the collar’s gap, furiously flicking across the small swath of skin when she felt nothing under the ivory cloth, convinced it was all an elaborate trick.

Long strands of ebony hair flicks back as the ex-dictator walks out of the room, not bothering to look back. “Come. We have much to discuss.”

An annoyed shout follows her out into the corridor. “Hold up. I ain’t leaving until you tell me this; where the fuck are we going?”

“Outside.”

This time, it was Ryuuko’s brow that was raised.

“No.”

A single spindle-shaped brow quirked at such an emphatic response, eyes coolly tracking the younger as the latter rocked on her heels, nonchalantly perched upon the perilous outcropping. Senketsu was back on her body, warmer and much more lively, a relaxed calm replacing the unbridled worry that plagued him of late.

“And for what reason do you have to reject such a proposal?”

“I don’t trust you.”

“You trust Senketsu.” The god robe visibly tightened around the Kiryuuin for emphasis, voicing it as well. “He trusts me, unconditionally, as he was with you. That is more than enough reason for you to trust me.”

“And I’m sure you think that *that* would be enough reason. Yeah, I trust him. But that is because there’s definite proof of him existing and being created with the express purpose to be paired with me. You weren’t and don’t have any shred of real evidence showing your true intentions. And what is there to stop you from doing the same thing Ragyou did and backstabbing everyone once she is out of the picture?”

“My Elites will vouch for my integrity.”

“Yeah, about that,” she stops, leaning against the mast. “From what Mako here told me, your ‘friends’...” here, she makes quotation marks midair with her fingers, “...aren’t so reliable. What, with your murder attempts towards me, Mako’s deep-frying incident with the bald boxer... all that shit. So tell me, Satsuki...” unimpressed ruby meets sapphire, “...why *should* I trust you?”

“I have devoted thirteen years of my life towards fighting Ragyou and her despicable goals, ever since our father had revealed her treachery to me shortly before his apparent demise. All the events leading up to the Great Culture and Sports festival - which I don’t doubt Mankanshoku informed you of - led up to this point. It was to create an entire legion of those under my command, ready to rebel against Ragyou and the life fibers, freeing them from their hold on humanity.

I have... learned that controlling people in the way *she* had favored was... wrong of me. That it was utterly reprehensible to garner allies to manipulate as I please in such a manner. I had forgotten to value each one those that fell under my rule as equals and partners in my venture, and had paid the ultimate price.”

“Oh yeah, sure you have. And I will swear my undying loyalty to you over this little speech of yours. Listen, *Kiryuuin*,” she snarled, emphasizing their unfortunately shared surname. “You shift motives way too fast and hide everything from even the people that rely on your ability to communicate with them. All *you* got is words to convince my ass that I shouldn’t just leave you here to die. And to be damn well frank about this, your words ain’t worth shit. Maybe you’re actually still with disco-dipshit clown-tits over there and you’re just faking this. With *all* the bullshit you put everyone through... heh, I wouldn’t be surprised if this was still in your plan.”

A quiet sigh and a minute sip of tea to calm frayed nerves. “I am willing to lay down my life for this.”

A short bark of raucous laughter. “Oh, I’m *sure* you are. Take a calculated risk, maybe get banged up a little... lose a limb or two? Tch. I bet you were just thinking of trying to offer me a couple of fingers - Yakuza-style.”

Shoulder-length wisps of hair moved as she turned to look at the other. “After all, what loss is *that* compared to the one you’ll get if you don’t get an asset like me on your side?”

Silence.

And then, “What will make you trust me?”

Blue-heeled boots scraped against grimy steel.

“No no no nono. You. Don’t. Understand. There is nothing present in the world right now that will make me trust you.

“Really.”

“Hmm... Perhaps... there is one thing...”

Heels push their owner off the mast, propelling her towards her cautiously-watching sibling in even footfalls.

“It’s simple, really.” She outstretches a hand to gesture at the other, a finger resting against her sternum before moving towards her own. “*You trust me.*”

For the first time, the elder Kiryuuin notices the scarring on both of the younger sibling’s palm. Quicker than a diving falcon, she snatches one of said limbs up, resisting the other’s hasty attempts to escape the hold.

“Hey- !”

“Kiryuuin Ryuuko,” Satsuki reads, inspecting the sloppy kanji and hewn interlinked stars. “And *why* would you have something like this if you do intend for us to blindly follow you into battle?”

Suddenly self-conscious, Ryuuko snatches her hand back with a snarl, tugging the sleeve of the kamui over it in vain hope that it would disappear from sight and memory.

“Simple. I cut myself when I was an idiot, following her orders like a dog. And you know what, it’s a dog-eat-dog world. What she doesn’t know, she ain’t the wolf around here anymore.”

A subtle glimmer to cobalt eyes.

“And *you* are?”

Ryuuko solidly places herself upon the mast’s protruding edge, teacup lazily dangling from a singular hooked pinky and dark liquid sloshing out delicately designed edges. Soroi had exercised some uncanny foresight and placed a tea set tray upon the Naked Solis precipice - perhaps in hopes that it would birth amenable relations instead of encouraging the siblings to make each other into bone china-infused mosaics.

“Tch. Hell if I know anymore. You and I both know that Ragyou needs to die soon, be it at either of our hands or someone else’s. Yeah, ‘*Kiryuuin Ryuuko*’.”

“You hold no loyalty to her?”

The bitter drink is devoured with a single gulp. Sangria stares reproachfully above the emptied cup. Quicker than her eyes could see, Ryuuko had positioned herself in front of her and had knocked her off her feet with a neatly executed tackle. She rolls, Ryuuko effortlessly sliding her along the deck and completely pushing her off the platform, only bothering to prevent her sister's premature death out of necessity. Firmly gripped by the ankle with naught but a single hand, Satsuki's body jerks to a stop, gravitational descent halted in its tracks as said body is hung over the edge of the Nudist flagship like a shiny new trophy. The fiberborn grins, cat-like, head propped by an open palm and antique teacup teetering dangerously at the end of a ring finger as she lies prone, upper body propped up with said elbow.

Satsuki exhales and lets her body slacken completely in submission. No sense stressing over a situation you couldn’t escape from. Better to be relaxed and prepared to maneuver to safety than waste time flailing tensed limbs like a dog in its death throes and firmly securing one’s demise preemptively.

“You know, before you decided to get all *disgustingly* sappy and try to win my *undying* loyalty through feeding me, I amused myself with much pursuits even discomilf over there objected to, like... kidnapping people for fun, slicing their achilles tendons, and watch them crawl on their bellies to their supposed freedom along the frozen ground, leaving a blood trail for the COVERS to sniff after. That *is*, before I decided that this wasn’t fun anymore and started to *really* put the pressure on ‘em by driving after them with one of those things you see doing laps in ice rinks. The *better* question you should ask, dear sister, is why would I

trust the bitch and continue lapping the crumbs at her feet instead of going for the entire entree when she had used and treated me as nothing more than her puppet?

...I wonder if you even know what she's been planning anyway, or if you seriously think she's been hiding in the corner, biding her sweet-ass time until Nui finishes the kamui and lets her transmit the life fibers all over the world? Surely, even you can't be that blind. But..."

She tilts her head slightly, confident gaze turning haughty and critical.

"Surely whatever *dearest mother* has planning is mere potatoes to what you have in mind. Like..."

The hand holding her ankles slackens just enough to plant the small seed of fear in her mind, a lurking trepidation of being dropped and left to plummet to her death. Cold logic dictated that Ryuuko would never follow through with the threat, but Ryuuko was anything but logical if her very nature was anything to go by.

"...Hm.... Making me associate with your filth and actively work under your inept command. But even the *infallible* Kiryuuin Satsuki fucked up - big time - with that last stunt you pulled. Admit it, your ass ain't fit to be running the shitshow, not with what information little you have. And face it. Even if your mutt starts digging, he ain't gonna find much. The house don't have virtual eyes or nothing, so it's not like he can find out where she's set herself up in."

A quiet exhale. No use lying.

"Indeed. ...Again, I am... willing to do whatever it takes to secure your trust. What do you have in mind?"

"Mmm..."

Satsuki meets her amused stare with a head tilt.

"I'm glad you asked."

Satsuki was restrained, spread-eagle and bound by the very same red threads that latched onto Ryuuko's heart and drove Ragyou to madness. Wrapping and winding 'round her still form innumerable times, it sought to sap her energy, parasitically weakening her in languid draws. Captive once more and only mildly interested in noting the present lack of overly-intricate bonds the director so favored using against her, it was only fitting that she was dealt a punishment equal in magnitude as the self-declared travesty the pig-headed daughter bestowed upon her own mother.

The Kiryuuin matriarch had foolishly let her second daughter guard the elder, still believing her loyalty absolute after the brief 'play session'. Nui had been passed over in favor of the

dragon-child for obvious reasons, the most prominent of them being her significant vitriolic urge to rend the oldest of the three into a thousand indistinct parts. Rei was powerless to fight against the heiress, even if she was devoid of anything but her own body to fight. As for herself, she deemed the constant, personal surveillance of her own daughter to be beneath her, now that it was 'proven' that Ryuuko showed absolute domination in combat.

So the Kiryuuin siblings sat apart from each other a mere meter away, doing nothing but staring at nothing in particular. Passage in and out of the decrepit interior was restricted - none but the empress herself was allowed to freely pass through for fear that a single nanosecond of distraction would allow for a second successful escape attempt.

To the common observer, it appeared as if Satsuki were asleep whilst centered perfectly in scarlet red webs, back-ramrod straight and taut limbs forced in an 'X' position while the more feral of the two busied herself with the rather boring task of watching over her charge. The only respite her person received came in the form of being temporarily lowered until the tips of her toenails just barely touched the ground by her sibling thrice a day. Unintentional mutual interest from both warring sides in ensuring the absolute minimal integrity her body could retain to prevent premature death, it also allowed her to hear the comings and goings of the mansion when the deafening pounding of blood in her ears lessened, if only for a brief moment. Clawed fingers scraped across the dirtied flooring, drawing a small rounded curve that faced away from her with flared tips at each end. The same fingers tapped the message again - three dashes, two dashes, dot, dash dash dot, dot dash. A lid cracked open in curious surprise, pacific blue depths watching her craft.

'Omega,' she wrote out, drawing a small, misshaped E-shaped figure next to it. *'Sigma.'*

Satsuki nodded, using the unnatural material of her false toenail to tap out her response against the ice-cold structure her back was pressed against. For once, she had indulged in the more trivial aspects of human nature and was glad for it, for it had proven to be a saving grace. And who else to dutifully apply such a thing upon her body but Nonon, the very girl that declared her loyalty from the beginning and doggedly followed her friend through life's trials, through thick and thin?

The black nail polish perfectly concealed the identity of the sharpened fragment fused to her toenail. In fact, the vile-smelling substance was also administered to the sword-nail as well, if only to maintain the illusion that it was all in part of attempting to hide from a bloodthirsty Ryuuko after the latter supposedly stripped her of her kamui. Black paint to match the black ash that she covered her body with.

The kicker was that the arrogant woman had bought it all- **hook, line, and sinker.**

The finger moved again, one hand drawing and the other translating. Two dots, three dashes, dash, dot dash.

Iota. Phi. Nu. Tau. Kappa. Beta. Theta. Alpha. Delta.

The ex-dictator mutely watched as more symbols were drawn out from dust and detritus in front of her, simple lines dictating movement across time and space in roughly hewn maps of the mansion proper, modes of attack and defense. In another time, she would have been

impressed that Ryuuko displayed such tactical knowledge, but she assumed correctly that she merely had placed Houka in a suffocating headlock and demanded to know their assigned values after he tried testing the mini-commsys' reception far too many times and annoyed all around him with his meticulousness.

In exchange for his cooperation and the 'privilege' to view the data he had gathered on her and on Ragyou in general (described by said hybrid as "a very fucking inaccurate collection of facts,"), she had taught him a bit of the physiology of the gods - of the life fibers, of their varieties and specific range of abilities entitled wherein. And between them, a language was born, one made mostly of taunts and various lewd suggestions as to which orifices he should place his companions' various weapons in or what organs she should methodically remove first to best prolong his suffering when all was said and done.

Ryuuko growled in low tones, disguising her speech with coded references within references in that very language. Position, status of kamui completion, and general observations were traded, and in return, attacks were relayed, if not with extremely lengthy pauses between conversation. A particularly terrifying snarl disturbing the lengthy peace brought her out of her reverie, and curious, she looked to the younger chimera for explanation.

"Poor Satsuki," she spat. "Looks like your saviors aren't coming at all. How... *unfortunate* for you. Looks like you're nothing but garbage marked to be consumed by clothing after all."

The faintest of nods, and the hardening of resolve behind steely cobalt orbs. A pregnant pause between all parties.

And now?

And now, we wait.

She had taken to placing herself in a meditative state - one that had been honed into a fine weapon in and of itself over the decade-long reformation of a soft, unshapen mound of clay into the steel queen that rebelled against the world today.

Three days passed, marked only by the cycling of the moon and the sun. The air was tense; Ryuuko filled with a source of unknown energy despite her greatly sleep deprived status. Any questions the elder posed, however, were deflected just as neatly as they arrived.

Her body was hunched over, sweat visibly dripping, teeth grit, and eyes closed as waves of indescribable agony passed through her. Lips moved, mouthing words unsaid and stoking agitated fires within. And when Satsuki called to her in those moments, voice soft and tainted with the slightest hint of fear, she looked upon her so terribly with shrunken pupils and a expression so utterly feral and full of hate that, had she not been trained to maintain an unperturbed front, would have sent her skittering back in absolute terror. And she would lash out, easily able to reduce a rebar and concrete support pillar or a solid steel panel to mere

fragments with an earth-shattering roundhouse kick before suddenly calming, easily resuming a muted facade that outwardly eluted nothing but calm.

The doors had all but been kicked open each time when it happened, an unfortunate underling and a swarm of COVERS sent to investigate the possibility of their valuable prisoner somehow managing to escape her bonds and subdue her watch-guard. And when the dragon child had decided to become particularly destructive, Ragyou herself would appear, a disapproving frown grudgingly turned admiring at the raw strength her daughter exhibited, even without override-boosted strength.

Only after the fifth episode did she understand, her younger sibling's irritating smirk becoming *almost* tolerable once she realized the true purpose of such a rash act. In fact, had her hands been free, she would have commended her for such uncanny foresight.

Ryuuko was watching. Waiting. **Calculating.**

Response times, aggression levels of said responders, willingness to recognize incidents... everything was being logged and filed away.

The episodes of late had become completely nonexistent for a day now, replaced by a self-satisfied grin and the hypnotizing sway of her white-clad body to a rhythm only she could hear. The soft '*tunk, tunk, tunk*' of bouncing legs striking worn carpeted ground only served to whet her appetite for knowledge, her inner steel queen fuming at the lack of communication and the amount of blind trust she was expected to exhibit.

And when such a thirst became nigh *unbearable* and her lips parted to spear fletched questions, Ryuuko slyly smiled, prematurely silencing the elder with naught but a finger to her lips.

Three fingers on the other hand quirked.

Then two.

Then one.

Then...

...

THUUM!

The elder sister perked up at the commotion, the duo feeling the vibrations thrum and rock the aging structure to its foundations.

Confusion ensued, panicked shouts, echoing down the hall. A chorus of booming voices shouted commands over each other, all accompanied by arguing and heavy sets of thumping footsteps. At one point during the chaos, Rei's head peeked through the worn double doors, hurriedly retreating when she saw nothing out of the ordinary.

The cannon fired again, blasting all the windows out in the manor's front and reducing decorative plaster and limestone to a fine dust.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

...

FWOOSH.

Three short, one long.

Smirking, Ryuuko's hand slipped up her skirt, retrieving from sharply creased folds a familiar dagger's ivory handle. Blood from thigh wounds so carefully created to conceal the blade's length is wiped on soiled rugs, the weapon restored to full length with painstaking concentration and the light touch of a bloodied finger against a miniature blackened side's tiny sliver. The weapon is thrown over to its rightful owner almost carelessly, its shiny, bloody body twinkling in the little light allowed in.

Satsuki catches the soiled dagger by its grip, holding it perfectly still using only the skin between two toes. With military precision, the blade is flicked downward, hardened life fiber constructs easily tearing through looser fibrous ones like buckshot through paper. Her foot flicks upward again, the dagger this time being caught by dexterous fingers. Satsuki swings her freed leg a perfect one hundred and eighty degrees the same time the dagger slices at the threads wrapped around her waist and wrist, arcing the sharpened toenail at the very last second. She falls, the flicking blade making short work of the last remaining links wrapped around her remaining wrist and ankle as she does so, landing in a crouch. Wasting no time, the fallen President hobbles over to the door where Ryuuko is already waiting, the microbead already freed from snarled strands of short hair pressed into the escapee's lax hands.

Another round of cannon fire to disguise their escape, and Ryuuko neatly kicks the door out with a single well-placed strike, a wicked grin splitting wide across her face. And with that, she was gone, withdrawing into the shadowy maze of corridors and disappearing from view.

Even though she knows she can't see her, Satsuki nods her gratitude, already hurrying down the hall to where the kamui undoubtedly would be. Quite fitting that this entire journey, this decade-plus-long battle, would end precisely in the same place where it all started. She pushed forward, ignoring burning lungs and the lactic acid biting fiercely at exhausted muscles in her quest to join the invading party sure to strike whilst the iron was hot and the

enemy caught by surprise. She would not falter here, not now, not when billions of lives were resting upon her very being.

The time to wait was over.

And now?

And now we run.

“You put your faith in mythos and lore, we put ours in weapons and whores. Your fiber god won’t save you now, when the Nudists strike from the starboard bow!”

~ Aikuro Mikisugi (Sensei Neon-Nipples), probably

Chapter End Notes

One Punch Mankanshoku- One Punch Man

Fist of the No-Star- Fist of the North Star

Ryuuko doubting Satsuki- adapted from a Tumblr post by Tumblogger eldritchgentleman.

Kinbaku/Shibari- string/rope bondage. I always thought some form of it was present in the show, what with the theme of fibers and all.

Ryuuko driving a zamboni- references a scene from the Deadpool movie.

End header- Parody of "Back Through Time" by Alestrom.

Blumenkranz

Chapter Summary

Blumenkranz (n.): 1a. “Flower Crown” (translated from German)

1b. Encephalic disassociation caused by cranial “blood eagles” (see: definition for encephalic disassociation).

2. Theme song of the world’s worst mom.

Original summary: Chapter 15- Blumemkranz: Diese welt ist grausam, es ist traurig aber wahr. It is advisable to remove withered flowers.

Chapter Notes

For the Garden of Eden reference, I did think Ryuuko looked angelic in her override (when looking upon her character design sketches), with Junketsu’s pointed shoulder pads appearing like wingtips and the hakama like the ends of the wings. Both Ryuuko and the angel were tasked with guarding the entrance to the Garden of Life/Eden with a blazing sword.

I would like to formally extend my thanks to those who have reviewed and messaged me regarding DTR, or left kudos/favorites. I could not have done this without your support, so thanks once again!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

***Diese welt ist grausam,
Es ist traurig aber wahr.***

(残酷な世界
悲しいまだ真)

Utter chaos.

That was the best way to describe the maelstrom of destruction currently sweeping through the Kiryuuin manor at the moment. Fire raged through the halls, streams of orange and yellow roaring as it raced down corridors, incinerating living cloth heaps that dared stand in its path. Fire resistant as life fibers were, they were no match for sustained temperatures well over that of house fires in their loose fibrous state.

Tsumugu roared as he ran through the flames, submachine guns blazing and splitting the silence with automatic needle-fed chatter. At his tail, the four devas followed close behind, each donning a protective mask and guarding his flanks, pushing through COVERS both human and cloth form alike. And behind the Elites, The mansion buckled as a new round of mortar strikes buffeted it once more, plaster crumbling and reinforced structure giving way under the relentless barrage.

“Lady Ragyou!” Rei shouted, hurriedly bowing before the elegant woman and nervously gripping the clipboard so hard it split down the middle. “We’re being invaded!”

Glossy lips contacted crystal, meticulously refined maroon cascading down its length to slip between parted halves. Unruffled response and unwavering calm ever-present, she allowed a small aliquot of the wine to drain before speaking. Even then her response was muted, seemingly uncaring for the trivialities of the world. She replaced the glass upon the armrest, swiveling the fine white chair to face the frazzled assistant.

“Mmm... I felt it as well. How far have they gotten in?”

“They’ve managed to bypass sectors one through five completely, and avoided all our defenses!”

A low hiss. “What-!?”

A mental run of the earthscape returned a worrying result; they were far into the manor, not yet at the very heart, but dangerously close to it, and the secret that it held within. She pursed her lips and scowled.

“It’s time,” she rose, sipping the last of the aged drink and tossing the glass away. “These naked apes have been an unsightly thorn in my side for far too long.”

She beckoned with a finger, silently ordering the ever-loyal assistant to trail behind.

“Come. I have an appointment with the Grand Couturier. You may alert my darling daughter and her friends to the intrusion before joining us. Oh,” she turned her head slightly to face the secretary. “You may bring Satsuki to me once all is said and done. Her time to be the means to her own destruction has come.”

Turning back, she clutched the silver handles, comfortably at ease despite the whirlwind of chaos raging about her. “The end is nigh, Hououmaru. Let us welcome it.”

She opened the imported French double doors, and embraced the billowing tide of ashy smoke with open arms, unconcerned as spigots of fire and destruction raced toward her.

Silence.

Peace.

Red. Orange. Yellow.

Pleasure unparalleled. A feeling of utter bliss, of contentment unmatched by worldly things. An indescribable sensation of being one with the world, to feel everything that is going on at once and be intricately linked to each and every event. To be entirely sure of one's place in the universe and know all the answers to every possible question. Nirvana.

"It is glorious, is it not?"

Dilated, half-lidded eyes. A rippling sensation that tickled nerves and tingled as it passed through relaxed flesh. A quiet sigh that passed through lips in response to the blanket of fibers cocooning a still body and cradling it; a mother embracing a newborn life. Softer than gossamer silk and more divine than the most luxurious of furs, it worked wonders on one's psyche, especially when said mentality was worn ragged with days of sleeplessness and taxing maneuvering of an entire armed force.

She awoke to a horizontal world, curled up like an unborn thing, breaths coming in even and relaxed. Doing away with umbilical cords and wasted trimesters, she straightens as much as she could within the supporting web that snaked around her, trapping her like a fly in a spider's nest. A fibrous band wrapped itself around her wrist and lay flush with the skin along her arm, snuggling against her warmth, and she exhaled quietly in contentment, feeling it pulse in time with her heartbeat.

She didn't even remember how she got here in the first place. One second, she was running off to lure Nui to the rear of the mansion after almost accidentally running into one of Ragyou's lapdogs, and the next, she blacked out and woke up to a world of orange. Not that it mattered anymore, of course. Her part was over, and all that was left to do was watch the spectacle. One domino after another, all fell into place to reveal the grand resolution. Those caught in the middle of her game were like bystanders in a parade, only able to see events as they happen. She, however, was the conductor, perched far above the events below and gifted with the ability to foresee all the twists and turns, all the possible and impossible routes for any single point in time.

"She's made her intentions clear."

One eye widened slightly, the lone currant orb twinkling in the tawny lighting. The mane of inky dark hair moved, head turning to the side and owner passively drinking the sights and sounds all in. Before her, the gourd-shaped object thrummed with life unparalleled, countless orbs orbiting the main body lighting up as it spoke.

“The end is nigh. The time to act is now.”

More threads descended from the ceiling, resting against her crown and digging deep into skin, where they touched upon fiber-spliced nerves once more. And images filled her mind as it abruptly left her body, replacing her vision with that of an endless void, black scattered with stars and accentuated with vivid celestial bodies. Her body drifting through space, becoming less human and more fibrous. Form unwinding, wholly giving herself up to the fibers within and nursing them, allowing them to ultimately consume her whole and leave her a lifeless husk while they traveled on stolen energy, colonizing other planets anew and restarting the cycle - the cycle of death and life and everything in between.

“Do not fail us.”

The threaded band around her arm inexplicably tightened, breaking skin and making contact with her own internal fibers.

“You know what you must do.”

Her body shuddered. Pleasure unbound, unmatched, struck her in waves as life fibers both alien and familiar touched, rocking her to her core. Scleras became thin slivers of white, bloody carmine pushing them to the razor’s edge. Red tendrils tickled her mind, tugging at the fibrous chains wrapped around the organ, loosening some threads and tightening others here and there.

Gear-shaped pupils shifted, dilating as well as the alien life finished its task. Small tremors running through the aging manor reminded her of the pressing situation at hand.

The world shifted between the orange-drenched interior of the hidden room and the quiet solitude of the empty chapel, elements from each melding with each other and interspersing at random. Ryuuko reached out, brushing a finger against where half of an altar jammed itself midair, expecting it to fall through. She blinked in confusion when her hand instinctively halted right where its polished wooden surface began, soon feeling the weight of a hand lightly resting on her shoulder, squeezing it reassuringly.

“You belong to us.”

She didn’t need to turn around to know who was behind her - not when he pressed against her and whispered in her ear, not when he traced patterns on her back. More threads wrapped themselves around her, preventing her from rising even as the ground-shaking explosions and thunderous bangs grew exponentially in magnitude and frequency.

Her vision swam again, the edges of her sight becoming grayed and dulled over time as it started to fade away. She shivered. For a moment, the strikingly vibrant colors in the room seemed to have disappeared completely, taking with it the inexplicable feeling of wondrous awe. Then, he was gone, and the remainder of the hallucinated objects with him.

“Say ‘yes, master’.”

Unbidden, her response flowed easily from her lips to the waiting god-fiber, spilling across time and space before her world went completely dark once more.

“Yes, master.”

“Yes, Lady Ragyou,” Nui chirped, cheerfully exposing the finished garment to her progenitor, much to the latter’s delight. “It’s just been completed!”

The kamui towered over the duo, shrouded in darkness like an omen, a lurking oni festering in parts unknown with naught but ill intents for its next victim.

“Magnificent,” the matriarch purred, stripping her white garments and doffing the feather boa that rested upon her elbows with a calculated wrist flick. “You’ve done a wonderful job, my *dear*. I absolutely can’t *wait* to see what it looks on me. I *must* try it on now.”

Completely bare once more, she stepped forward, allowing the Grand Couturier to flit about her, slowly slipping the multilayered ceremonial garb on. She stretched once her body was completely enveloped by the god robe, relishing the truly wonderful euphoric feel that only the life fibers could provide. Although it was neither as intricate nor as long as it would have been hadn’t the naked apes assaulted its production repeatedly, its impressive appearance cast awe upon who saw it, appearing more reminiscent of a traditional wedding gown than anything else.

Now fully dressed, she stood far above the blonde and the approaching attendant, body freakishly contorted and elongated to protrude from the garment’s openings, yet experiencing nothing but sheer bliss at the same time.

“Lady Ragyou,” Rei bowed, keeping shielded eyes focused on the gold-inlaid floor. “The Elites have been contacted. I was unable to find Lady Ryuuko after returning to the room where she and...” she paused, tasting the familiar honorific in her mouth as if it were pure poison. “... *Lady* ... Satsuki were imprisoned in, however. The walls were splattered with blood and was the entire wing utterly decimated by the attack. I believe she had escaped in the resulting chaos and Lady Ryuuko given pursuit after her.”

Ragyou’s lips pursed in disapproval at the sound of the first-born’s name. “Very well. If Ryuuko is pursuing her, she shouldn’t pose too much of a threat. However...” she took a step forward, pleased when the god robe encompassing her felt as light as a feather and served her well in its deadly beauty. “I have been plagued by her and her ilk for far too long. ...I suppose you all must know what I’m thinking,” she sighed, admiring the way it rippled about her, undulating across her form to accommodate it.

“We know what we must do,” the assistant answered, demurely maintaining her posture-perfect bow to demonstrate her unwavering loyalty - something the first of her mistress’ own flesh and blood failed to portray time and time again.

“Yes, Lady Ragyou!” The Grand Couturier nodded, rocking on her heels in excitement.

“Then let us teach these swine the folly of humanity.”

Six thick fibrous threads snaked from the matriarch’s back, winding its way through the air towards the two. Nui squeaked in absolute joy as she was lifted up, barely managing to contain her ecstasy as the billowing folds of the robe swallowed her whole, Rei following soon after.

Ragyou shrieked in mad laughter as a lustrous rainbow gradient filled the dark space within. The god robe shifted, sprouting ghostly eyes that floated above her shoulders as the brilliant light increased in intensity, the brightness soon spilling into the corridor proper and snaking into the furthest recesses of the crumbling building.

The ground broke from beneath, halting the raiding party in their tracks as a massive hand punched through the expansive flooring. From its depths, a solid sheet of white rose like a demon escaping from hell, edges laced with red fibers that glittered threateningly in the fiery lighting.

“What the-!?”

A massive hand clawed forward, gaining purchase in the granite beneath clumsy digits, followed by its opposing limb. Dozens of shriveled human faces stared at the squad from the cloth giant’s tie as it fully extracted itself from the earth’s grip, moaning in abject agony. Horns made from the suit’s extending lapels pierced the decorative plaster above, somehow managing to reach the three-story ceiling.

“Retreat to the second meet-up point!” Houka shouted to the Nudists following behind, an order they were all too happy to comply.

“What. Is. That!?” Tsumugu snarled, hurriedly exchanging his spent magazines for fresh ones and aiming for its center.

“It appears to be a COVER specialized for combat.” Inumuta explained, dodging as a sweeping arm made to bowl him into a wall and crush the life out of him.

The cloth monster lumbered forward, heedless of the multiple extractor devices raised in its direction. Raising its front to the ceiling above, it roared, rushing towards the stunned group, intent on painting the walls a stunning shade of red.

“They’re beyond saving. Let us go!”

Gamagoori charged ahead, the dark kamui’s sleeves clinging to the spiked ring-like structure mounted on the giant’s back. Mako stood at his side, protecting the behemoth from backside

attacks, a fierce look in her eyes unparalleled by the many men swarming after the leading party.

He locked arms with the titanic-sized COVER, unafraid of the multi story-tall clothing even as it rained plaster upon them as it traipsed through the centuries-old building. Mako ran along their deadlocked arms, black cape billowing behind her.

Her brass knuckle-clad flew out, and soon after, a perfect mirror of her name embroidered by a broad star was firmly printed on the suit's surface. The monster stumbled back, tearing deep gouges into the walls proper and knocking supports of rebar and concrete askew. Roaring angrily, it staggered back to its feet.

Its efforts to recoup and retaliate were aborted, however, when a flash of black neatly cleaved through its body five times in succession. A blur of ebony shot out from beneath its crumbling form, efficiently weaving behind its stubby legs and dodging its heavy form as it fell. Six jaws slacked in astonishment at the sight.

“Lady Satsuki!”

She tumbled and rolled elegantly, pushing off her hands as she came out of the fluid movement and gracefully slicing through the mob of waiting clothes as they dove toward her with her dagger. Somersaulting and vaulting over a dying COVER, she landed in front of the seven and was immediately assaulted by the same question they all had in mind.

“Where’s -

“ - Ryuuko?”

“ - Matoi?”

“ - Ryuuko-chan?”

“ - that underachieving transfer student!?”

She shook her head, instead sprinting off and indicating that they should follow after her before they could get another word (or attempts to cover her nakedness) in edgewise. Her bare feet slapped against the ground, rhythmically painting a clear path through the chaos and destruction.

“She stressed that under no circumstances can she be seen with us, for obvious reasons. Hopefully, she’s intentionally misdirecting any defense, as discussed. Status of bombardment?”

“Temporarily halted. I’ve radioed a stop, until we expose our objective to attack.”

Satsuki nodded. “Come, let us get downstairs. We need to destroy the Primordial Life Fiber before - ”

They froze in place, a sudden earthquake forcing them to duck into the nearest alcove for cover.

“Another one?” Uzu grumbled, readying his shinai and glaring holes into the floor.

Rather than subsiding after a few tense seconds, the tremors grew more and more powerful, the subsequent earth-shaking rattles intensifying with it.

“No...” Satsuki realized, narrowing her eyes as a glow appeared at the end of the corridor, growing closer with every thundering shake. “It’s much worse...” she turned to face her comrades and barked **“RUN!”**

They scrambled, heading back the way they came as the first rays of the light began to encompass them.

“Satsuki?” A familiar, and much-less needed voice crooned in a sickening, faux-motherly voice, tainted with the faintest hint of sadistic glee. “Satsuki, is that you?”

“Faster!” She shouted in response, urging them on.

“Too late!” Houka yelped, feet suddenly parting ways with terra firma as he was swept away and into the wall.

Satsuki saw it coming and dropped, rolling to safety underneath a cherry dining table with four others. Gamagoori, however, wasn’t so lucky; his massive size made it all but impossible for him to dodge the attack. Senketsu barely managed to hold on for dear life, grumbling as the massive man’s weight pinned him to the floor and helplessly flailing his sleeves.

“Shit,” Tsumugu growled, pressing a finger to his ear and shouting in hopes his old friend could hear him. “Mikisugi! Aikuro! We need a bombardment, ASAP. Can you hear me!? I need a bombardment-!”

Without warning, the table above them lifted, and Ragyou’s leering face greeted them, absolutely smug.

“Found you,” she crowed, tossing the furniture piece away.

The group scrambled, spilling into the foyer proper and taking defensive positions in front of the student leader. Gleeful despite the fact that she was absolutely drowning within the innumerable layers of cloth swathing her body, she shot forward, intending on thrusting a hand and spearing the chests of each and every one of these hairless monkeys gathered before her now.

“Sanageyama!” She shouted, and the green-haired deva responded immediately, throwing to her her sword. She caught the wakizashi without looking, reflexively pivoting on a heel and slashing through a waiting COVERS with her false toenail. She pushed off the dying construct, shooting her body through a falling Senketsu the recovering disciplinary head threw and gracefully donning him before her heels even hit the ground.

“Can you even *use* that awful dishrag of yours, Satsuki?” Ragyou jeered. “Or is your so-called ‘resolve’ broken now that you’re faced with the ultimate kamui, one that far

outmatches Junketsu and the silly patchwork scrap heap Souichirou sewed together?”

Satsuki scoffed, the seki tekko’s pin already loosed with a mere curl of her fingers. “You’ll see how powerful my resolve is when faced with the prospect of victory!”

Blood shot through the singular entranceway, flooding navy fibers and filling empty channels with fresh blood. Power flowed back in return, the half-synchronization the Kiryuuin elder managed to unlock at the very most reinvigorating a battered body still far from recovery.

“Life fiber synchronize! Kamui Senketsu!”

“Oh?” Ragyou put a hand to her lips, drawing a line across the flesh. “You, still thinking you can outclass me by working with that patchwork garb of Souichirou’s? How amusing. But it doesn’t stop the truth from being told, my dear. You aren’t wearing that awful piece of clothing properly, nor are you wearing it at all. You’re just faking unity with it, just as you faked unity with Junketsu!”

“No!” Senketsu shouted, eye narrowing in disgust at the woman before him now. “While our bond was a farce in the beginning, it has grown, has become something more than two enemies working together to stop a larger threat!”

“Oh?” Her eyebrow quirked, murmuring to herself. “So it decides to speak after all... How amusing...” She adjusted her stance, drawing her twin needle-blades from within the robe’s folds and moving into a defensive guard with them.. “Well then... Let’s begin, shall we?”

“Time?” Satsuki whispered, grimly glaring at the arrogant woman before them.

“Approximately an hour and a half.” The god robe replied, carefully examining its wearer through their blood connection. “Assuming we’re stressed to the same levels Ryuuko put us at the last time we engaged in combat. Otherwise, we can expect only approximately an hour at the most.”

He felt her relief flooding through his fibers. “Good. That’s more than enough time.”

“Is it now?” Ragyou jeered, flicking the hooded robe back and fully exposing the rainbow-trimmed layers within. “I seem to recall you couldn’t even defeat me within ten minutes the last time we fought.”

“I won’t make the same mistake twice!” Satsuki snarled, charging forward, blades raised.

“Will you?” Her mother taunted, waves of white spilling after her feet as her arms moved in tandem.

Steel-blue eyes glinted with determination. **“No. I. Won’t!”**

The director’s eyes widened as her daughter effortlessly dodged the fist meant for shattering her blades into useless fragments once more. A foot flicked out, catching the other’s clothes with a heel and flinging her to the side.

Ragyou recovered quickly, twisting to the side and letting loose fletch-winged projectiles from within the robe's creases. Satsuki leaned back, deadly hisses of air brushing against her face and whipping black bangs into a frenzy, letting them sail harmlessly past before exploding against a heavy oak door. She flipped away from her mother, eyeing the decorative trinkets linking the walls.

"Senketsu!"

"Ready!"

Red blades sprouted above interdigital folds upon command, the teenage dictator hooking vase after vase with kamui-made claws and hurtling them. Ragyou sneered as they were all destroyed with but a single sword slash. The Elite Four intervened, steadfastly protecting their leader against the assault, deflecting impromptu projectiles as the Kiryuuin matriarch employed the same tactic, sprouting dozens of fiber-thread appendages to hurtle everything within reach.

"Ha! Foolish!" She sneered, catching Nonon with one and yanking her out of the air, smashing her into the floor with a sickening crack. "Foolish, all of you!" Houka was next, forced away by the threat of being sliced in half by a suit of armor's weaponry.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the two remaining devas. Gamagoori could hold his ground, battling against the attacking threads with his own. Sanageyama, however was alternating between using a flurry of strikes or dodging. "Sanageyama! Cover Gamagoori! Gamagoori, help Nonon!"

"Got it!"

Ragyou approached, the snaking tendrils behind her swishing malevolently. "I expected more of a challenge from you, Satsuki! To think that this is the best humanity can offer - hah!"

Satsuki merely grinned snidely in response. "That's what you think! Senketsu Shippu!"

A whirlwind suddenly whipped through the room, carrying innumerable shards airborne and propelling them into her eyes. She howled as ceramic pierced delicate tissue and stubbornly remained embedded within, goblets of blood streaming forth from injured flesh. Vermillion heels boosted to outrageous speeds stomped on her chest, cherry stars twinkling as the kamui switched back to its normal combat form. The Director roared as the younger pushed off her, black blade whipping out and neatly severing a hand as she did so. Blindly, Ragyou punched with the bleeding stub, the other transforming the remaining blade into a split-antler conformation, visions of a skewered Satsuki filling her head. Her dream was denied, however, when the heiress quickly forced it aside with an open-handed block, using her other arm to seize hold of the injured limb and twist the joint to the brink of dislocation.

Smirking in satisfaction, she stepped in closer just before the falling white blade crashed into the ground where her body was. Releasing her grip on the limb, she allowed her mother to recover for only a split-second before a hand restrained it once more and darting fingers flew like a falcon's talons, grabbing hold of the woman's bicep and digging clawed-tip fingernails into the small divit the flexing muscle created. Ragyou shrieked as the corded flesh was

suddenly ripped out of place, holding the wounded appendage even as the Senketsu-Satsuki pair charged, hacking away at the kamui with blades of black and red.

One after the other, they tore through the cloth layers, trails of carmine soon reaching flesh and leaving a tell-tale story of a revenge long sought after. Nose wrinkling in disgust, Satsuki grasped at the tattered folds, fisting a wad in her hand and using it to swing the body trapped within about her. The CEO's body limply crashed against the Kiryuuin family tapestry, the ornate cloth draping about her body as if to mock her, as if to remind her that the centuries of carefully-executed family history that built her up wasn't even enough to overpower one so inexperienced in the life fibers as she was.

Satsuki approached her coldly, pointedly ignoring the massive slew of mooks that surrounded her. Any and all of these lesser opponents were either blasted away by accident as they leapt in to attack, or were ripped to shreds by her fellow rebels. Ragyou rolled to her side, debris falling from her eyes, wounds stitching closed, and motions to regain her footing already put into place. Abandoning all pretense of collected calm, Honnouji's supreme ruler rushed forward with her blades skillfully poised in hand, intending on ending the life of a monster that was allowed to ravage this world for far too long.

She swung, roaring bloody justice for a father wronged and a sister left imprisoned within her mind...

TSING!

...only for a sliver of gold to dart between her and her target, stopping twin Bakuzan in their tracks.

Satsuki stared, the polished surface of the blade reflecting her shocked expression.

“What...?”

She was blindsided then, an uppercut sending her up and away and smashing her head against unforgiving concrete.

“Poor, poor Satsuki. Left in the dark after all this time.” Ragyou sneered, standing up and gesturing to the approaching shadowy figure, reclaiming her hand and reattaching it all the while. “Satsuki, meet your half- your better half, rather. The magnificence you would have ascended to, had you not cast your pearls before swine and lay amongst them in hopes you'd save this pitiful species from the glorious destiny that awaits them. This is your mirror image, forged from memories extracted from your precious students. How ironic that *you* will be the one to destroy yourself.”

Oh. No.

Akiko stepped fully into the light, avocado-colored eyes twinkling sinisterly as black-booted feet firmly planted themselves in front of their mutual progenitor, the four cloned followers dispersing behind her in the same manner as their counterparts had once done with Satsuki herself. Wordlessly, the duplicates took their position by their leader, calling forth the attention of their originals, who stood slack jawed at the sight and merely offered choked exclamations of surprise. Satsuki shifted her stance, noting her clone doing the same. A dark-heeled foot hooked itself under the replica Bakuzan's tsuba, effortlessly wrenching the embedded blade from the ground and allowing a darting ashen hand to snatch its handle out of the air. The Satsukis raised their guards at the same time, eerily mirroring the other with matching poses. Impassioned eyes of cobalt and forest narrowed, one set in grim determination and the other in gleeful bloodthirsty pleasure, their opposing transformed kamuis doing the same.

So this was the twin Ryuuko was talking about, the one she only caught a brief glimpse at a few days prior. Good to finally see it in person.

She stepped forward, still in her guard, brandishing her blade and sizing her opponent up. From the cocky swagger in the duplicate's step and the way it- she?- sneered at her, she assumed it was also doing the same. Behind her, her Elites had rushed to her side, creating two opposing walls of titanic forces, one painted in various colored hues of their own designation, and the other with a gleaming beacon of rainbow-tinged white behind the cloned curtain of black.

She moved her foot a half-inch forward, and the clones reacted, bolting forward and engaging their other halves in combat. Satsuki held her ground and instead moved only her arms, barely managing to catch her opposite's darting weapon and secure it in a blade lock. She narrowed her eyes, frowning as other other smugly grinned and pushed against her, hoping to send her stumbling back. She was fast- deadly fast. She hissed under her breath when another swipe forced her further back. She'd have to watch her more closely, then, and try to slip her blade between the cloned armor and strike from within.

They broke their deadlock, flying to opposite sides of the room as bursts of hues and blades painted painfully bright streaks in the air. Again and again they darted towards each other, their arms and blades becoming colorful blurs of black and red and green and gray. At various intervals, Ragyou would move between all six ongoing fights to intervene, causing them to prematurely abort what would be a fatally crippling striking blow and retreat more than once. Rebounding off the concrete and plaster wall after what seemed like the thousandth collision, Satsuki neatly flipped midair as the other went in for a forward strike, hoping to slice at her neck.

No dice, however. It was swatted aside, and for her troubles, Satsuki was kicked in the jaw as the clone whipped around. Adding insult to injury, the duplicate neatly pivoted on a heel and executed a back kick, slamming against her sternum and pounding against battered ribs. She was launched through a wall and into the room adjacent, rolling on the ground and skidding to a stop on her side.

"Senketsu?" The dictator grit out, raising a hand to injured bone and weakly rising to her knees as her clone approached, her shadow growing larger within the cloud of roiling gray

smog.

“It seems like your duplicate has completely adopted your moveset,” it mused, flicking his lone eye up to meet hers. “The fight would be evenly matched.”

She narrowed her eyes, watching as the double suddenly sprinted as she caught sight of her downed prey, rushing to meet her head-on with the force of a speeding train.

Time slowed to a crawl, then.

She saw how her faux muscles rippled within the equally false Junketsu, how she held her blade. The stance, the form, even the way she moved. He was right. There was no way to win this without intervention. That is, unless...

Realization dawned upon her.

She grinned fiercely, piquing his attention. “Then it looks like we’re going to have to adapt.”

“Oh?” He tried- and failed miserably- to hide his sudden interest.

“It’s time to get reckless. Senketsu Senjin!”

She combat-rolled away as the golden arc came swooshing down, embedding itself into the ground proper once more as she escaped with her life. Immediately after she came out of the dodge, sharpened crimson extensions of every size grew from the kamui’s fringes, rapidly snaking about razor-sharp edges like chainsaw blades.

"I see..." He hummed, memories of fighting against his brainwashed former wearer rapidly flashing in his mind. "So that's what we're getting at..."

Satsuki moved swiftly, snaking in and out of her opponent’s range, zig-zagging through the chaotic space between them like a coursing river. Impacting heels drove deep indents wherever she sprung, expensive stone furnishings cracking into spidering fragments under her sheer will. False-Satsuki growled in annoyance, forced to chase after her and constantly change positions in vain attempts to head her original off.

The president doubled back, slinging herself over her copy's incensed head. With a Earth-shaking yell, she planted her wakizashi into the ground, allowing her body to swing around its center to plant a bone-shattering kick to her clone’s back as whirring blades of the god robe tore into the black Junketsu copy. Akiko rolled forwards and landed on all fours, gouging finger-furrowed marks in the tiling. Leaping high into the air, she rebounded off Greek-styled rebar columns encrusted in jade and gold, kiaing to the heavens as clone Bakuzan was hefted high into the air.

Satsuki pushed off the expensive tiling, flipping back. She smirked as her double’s grimace grew more pronounced and frustrated as she switched between the Shippu forms and back again. Every move, every strike the other made... indeed, it was a perfect copy of her own fighting style. Purely utilitarian, every swing was made as if it were the last, intending on taking the life of the opponent. It was precise as it was spartan and inelegant in appearance.

Years of honing the craft had made it near impenetrable and undefeatable, even to herself, and her clone knew it. However, what Akiko hadn't accounted for was the sparring sessions Ryuuko roped her into, where she systematically destroyed it into innumerable pieces, forcing her to reforge the blade of her heart and temper it into something stronger, something far more durable than what it could have ever hoped to become before her chaotic tempest of a sibling was thrown back into her life. So she fights as Ryuuko does, toeing the line between disorder and control and dangerously flirting with one side before abruptly fishtailing and careening towards the other.

Her diligence is rewarded when more strikes break through the defensive stances the other has put up.

"Little pest," Akiko snarled, clashing blades with her once more.

Ground cracked, and columns sundered under crushing force as they met, twin forces of unimaginable power laying waste to everything around them.

"Mikisugi... ne... bard... repeat!... ..need a bombardment!"

Tsumugu's voice crackled in his earpiece, faint and grainy, tinged with the slightest trace of grim determination.

"Eugh..." a waterlogged Mikisugi groaned, a world of blue and gray tumbling and rolling about as he lay on the deck, struggling to regain his footing like a fish out of the water. "What was that...?"

"Sir," Soroi pointed past the great ship's bow, where six titanic hands held the deck and locked the watercraft in place. At the behemoths' sides were innumerable human-form covers, already dropping onto the steel plating below despite the withering fire that came from the Nudists' defensive weaponry.

"Ah," he breathed, eyeing them up and down. "That could be a problem. Looks to be COVERS, specialized for attack."

"What shall we do, sir?" The aging butler nervously stated, dread creeping into his bones as he saw the three titans rising far above them.

"We do what we Nudists do when we're pressed up against the wall," he defiantly glared the swarm of clothing down, even as they dug their fingers into the ship and started to tear off the first layer of armor. "We fly by the seat of our cheeks!"

Slamming his hand on the console, a sequence of buttons was pressed, and a rippling blaze of fire from mounted cannons at the ship's front followed suit afterward. The COVERS' attempts to kidnap his crew were halted, automatic turret fire ripping them to shreds and

dislodging the trapped guerrillas before they could be assimilated into the suits. The combat COVERS backed off, raising their hands defensively to protect themselves against the siege. And somewhere underwater, twin hatches opened, metal retracting and sliding to the side before revealing the domed tops of two torpedoes.

Fists larger than a small building slammed against the warship's top. Water sloshed violently at the act, the Nudist leader fighting with the controls to resist capsization. Furious, his hand slapped against the console once more, keying in the release sequence.

"Firing!"

A stream of bubbles jetted towards the recovering monsters, powerful matching explosions following afterward that knocked the trio off their feet and sending them sprawling into the bay once more.

"All right!" He cheered, pumping a fist into the air. "Direct hit! Prepare for a second round!"

A polite tap on his shoulder caught his attention. "Sir, look! People!"

Mikisugi squinted. Indeed, as he focused, he could make out the sprawled outlines of various Honnouji club leaders, all unconscious from the time spent in clothing-borne imprisonment. He nodded, keying back into his headset.

"Right then! We need the medical team on deck, pronto!"

Instantly, three combat medics and a combat medic dog appeared behind him, backs straight and saluting closed fists across their chests.

"Ready for duty!"

Gesturing towards the fallen club leaders, he turned his attention back to the recovering assailants.

"Get them patched up! We may need them later."

"Croquettes for unfathomable energy!" Suyuko chirped, whipping out a plate for emphasis.

"And enough bandages to wrap everyone up five times over! We'll take care of everyone! ...And then charge them out-of-pocket once this is all over," Barazo added, murmuring the last part to himself.

"Right!"

"Gatsu!"

And with that, they sped off, disappearing from his side and reappearing at the tower base in record time.

Mikisugi surveyed the deck damage below as they worked, frowning. It wasn't enough to cause any serious harm, but still.

He keyed back in, this time into the local channel shared only by the cabin crew. “How’re we doing?”

A hissing buzz of static. Then, the raspy voice of an officer replied, “Sir, decks seven and eight are compromised, but we’re able to do without them. All automatic defense systems are still up, but our reserves are taxed! We have enough to sustain it and movement under 25 knots, but we can’t do anything otherwise.”

“We have to think of something...” he mused, watching the life fiber monsters as they recovered, pushing against each other in an attempt to rend the ship into scrap first. “Otherwise, we won’t be able to show off what we Nudists are made out of. And we can’t have that, can we?”

“Sir, you don’t mean...?” Soroi began.

“That’s right,” Aikuro confirmed, shooting the elderly man a confident grin. “We’re going to pull the granddaddy of all trump cards. The Great! Naked! Dagger!” Gritting his teeth and setting his jaw in determination, he barked into the communicator system, “We need more power!”

Just then, an unfamiliar voice crackled to life on the radio. “Leave it up to me.”

Iori stepped forward onto the damaged deck, a giant wad of glimmering life fibers attached to his back and uniforms of every shape and size rapidly being formed by the multiple mechanical limbs his uniform sported. He tossed the completed ones towards the respective recovering club captains, ushering them onward and guiding them below deck.

“Everyone! To your uniforms!”

Rejuvenated and pumped full of unfathomable energy from Mrs. Mankanshoku’s mystery croquettes, they donned their gear and took to the generators. One after another, they piled on, running within the gigantic wheels like there was no tomorrow. The tailor nodded as they did so, the collective combative morale of the few rallying others, breathing new life into the weary souls of war-torn veterans. And soon, the output of all four generators spiked, bringing rusting machinery to life.

“Ready for launch!” The seamster shouted.

“Alright! Everyone, get down!”

Metal scraped. Turrets retracted. Shielding plates slid back. Steel ‘wings’ lining the warship deck folded inward, forming the razor-edged spine the ship so proudly sported. Thrusters brimmed with energy, stars sparkling as an ephemeral burst of intense power shot out from behind, pushing it to speeds that naval engineers could only dream of. The ship launched clear out of the water and solidly rammed into the trio, splitting them apart at the bow and shredding their fibers into nothing more than red debris. Like a soaring eagle, the ship arced majestically, a rainbow burst issuing from behind and turning this assault watercraft airborne.

“You think me an easy mark?” She laughed, tilting her head to the side and allowing the bamboo sword and energetic missile to pass her by. Neck bones snapped as she corrected her stance, straightening upward and smiling deviously. “I’ll show you the power of one who has given herself over to the life fibers!”

An electric hum seemed to fill the empty space, charging the air with a rippling electricity as the multicolored trim the last kamui bore glowed intensely. She launched off the ground then, body of white becoming a multicolored blur faster than any of their naked eyes could track. A rainbow streak raced through the open room, bouncing off the walls and arching into the air, easily avoiding any and all attempts made at swatting her to the ground. One by one, they were knocked off their feet and sent sprawling pitifully to their sides. Pained groans intermingled with exclamations of shock as hands were raised to various bleeding body parts, deep gashes having been hewn into refined armor and cut into delicate flesh as she struck them to the floor.

“Do me a favor,” she sneered, straightening her back amidst her fallen foes, flicking the gathering blood off her blade in one elegant motion.

Hundreds of thin fibrous spears protruded from every inch of the kamui, dozens aimed at every one of the enemy combatants in the room. The air whistled as they streaked forward, hellbent on rending flesh and breaking bone. Eyes widened, the Nudist rebels could do nothing as they grew nearer, paralyzed by pure terror.

Ragyou cackled. “Die.”

Then...

At the last second, a mangled wreck of twisted steel burst through the walls and slammed squarely into her gigantic body, dislodging both Rei and Nui from her innards and sending half of the pair clear of the mansion proper - a shattering of glass marking the poor assistant’s abrupt departure - and the other twirling through the air like a ballerina.

“What the...?”

“Just in time,” Tsumugu exhaled in relief, grinning as his personalized DTR shattered the ground beside him and Aikuro plopped down afterward, already loaded within his mech.

“We ready?”

“Yeah,” he groaned, stretching his neck as he mounted the machine and let its metal jaws close around him. “Let’s do this.”

Hundreds of Nudists poured from the wrecked ship like a tidal wave, numbers bolstered by the three dozen ex-club Presidents that flanked their sides. Together with the rallying crew of Nudists already present at the site, they charged, staining the palace of white with a sea of brown and black.

“This is insane!” Nonon groaned, ducking as another flute-missile rocked the very ground she stood on.

“Speak for yourself,” Uzu grinned, body twisting as one strike from Uzu II after another was easily dodged, “This party is just getting started!”

Cloned copies successfully distracted in the resulting aftermath of the Naked Sol’s unexpected entrance, they soon lost sight of their targets, swarmed relentlessly by the oncoming assaulting wave. Houka landed by his leader, data-cords whipping out and burying into a COVER, ripping it to tattered shreds a second later. He turned to face her, moving in time with the ex-President as the both started to carve a path through the mayhem.

“Lady Satsuki, go! We’ll hold off as long as we can”

His leader nodded, Senketsu shifting about a hand and feeding his strength into her, allowing her darting fist to cleanly punch through the floor. Without a second to waste, she leapt, disappearing into the darkness below. From there, she blindly moved through the endless splitting corridors that seemed to want to keep her trapped there, as if the mansion had a will of its own. Finally, after many attempts and countless backtracks, she skidded to a halt outside the arched entranceway leading to the Primordial Life Fiber’s room, glaring daggers at the towering purple double doors. This was it. This was where it began, and where it would end.

“Are you ready, Senketsu?” She asked, rolling her shoulders and gripping her dual blades that much tighter.

Senketsu grunted in affirmation. “Let’s do it.”

She opened the doors, surprised to find that they were already unlocked...

...and was completely startled when a white boot suddenly found its way into her stomach and kicked her back up the stairs, sending her tumbling up stone steps to lie in a boneless heap.

She coughed, a streak of blood escaping her mouth despite her best efforts. She looked up, cobalt eyes widening upon meeting formerly similarly-colored ones.

“R...Ryuuko?”

The hybrid merely hunched her shoulders, glare darkening upon hearing her name. Junketsu’s predatory eyes glared in the dark, vivid pinpricks of color piercing to her very soul. Her twin

swords swung back and forth like pendulums in a clock, casting trails of blazing red in the inky darkness like the angel guarding the garden of Eden.

“C-Can’t let you do that, S-Satsuki,” she hisses, voice strangely distorted and breathing labored. “I... can’t...” Twitches wracked her body, movements jerky and uncoordinated. “I... I...”

Her head snapped up, then, and a feral manic light seemed to fill her eyes. Her form straightened, becoming perfectly upright once more. Without saying a word, she pushed off the ground, speeding towards the Kiryuuin elder like a bullet. Satsuki barely had enough time to cross her blades together to fend the rending scissor halves from severing her arms from her body. The delinquent pushed, leveraging her hold despite the height disadvantage and forcing her sister to bend over backwards. Once there, she broke the bladelock, moving her arms aloft and letting the blades lie side by side.

She snickered at the heiress’ startled reaction as a series of clinks filled the air. The blades disassembled, the sharpened halves splitting in two as they would in their pre-decapitatory form. She moved the split sword bodies into each other then, melding the opposite halves together and transforming the twin blades into a terrifying war axe. She dodged as Ryuuko thoughtlessly swung out once more, Junketsu’s sky blue outlines blinding her temporarily as they flared to life. She choked on her spittle as her sister’s heel winded back and caught her in a hook kick, body bouncing as it tumbled down the stairs. Dazed and barely managing to hold her ground as the world swayed, lights swimming before in her eyes.

The shadow standing before her moved, and she was jolted back into action, side-stepping the ridiculously elongated weapon as it crashed mere centimeters from her. A slash of crimson flicked out, and she barely managed to avoid the sickle-curved wave of pure energy that followed, ducking underneath as it whizzed by overhead and cut more than a few strands of hair short.

The ex-President staggered to her feet, wiping the trail of blood from her lips as the younger leapt in front of her, once again guarding the entranceway with arms held akimbo and blood-slicked blades gripped casually, already having been split back into their original forms. Ryuuko stepped towards her, allowing her target to reorient herself and beat a hasty retreat back up the stairs.

“Satsuki,” Senketsu warned. “We can’t abandon our objective. They’re counting on us.”

Satsuki bounded up the long winding set of stairs five at a time, leaping over crumbling stone as arcs of sickly red followed after, cleaving into the walls and floors around them. “I know, but the objective is impossible at the moment, without having to directly confront Matoi. How much time do we have left?”

“At this rate?” Senketsu’s eye narrowed, thoughtful. “Approximately ten minutes. I underestimated the strain you would undergo, especially when fighting opponents like Ragyou. Your blood is running quite low. I can attempt to draw from previous blood reserves, but even then it will only buy us a couple additional moments.”

“Right.”

Satsuki flew up the remaining stairs, the endless sets of steps seeming to go on forever before it opened back into the room and revealed the chaotic battle once more. Ragyou was occupied, a swarm of nudists expertly engaging her from the safety of cover, complete with guerrilla tactics employed.

Sanageyama let loose a thundering kiai as he leapt overhead, sword poised. The white-haired woman swiveled to face him, bristling angrily as she caught sight of the Kanto teen.

“Tch.” her eyes narrowed. “The sword of a blind man can’t hit me.”

They struck at the same moment, Ragyou not even bothering to grace her assailant with a look as an arm swung out, dismissively striking against the bamboo shinai. Imagine to her surprise, however, when the skin on her head prickled. Snapping her eyes open in shock, she watched as a few strands of glittering rainbow-gradient hair serenely floated past.

“Sorry to disappoint, Director,” he grinned, the green cloth mask that covered his eyes neatly bisecting and falling away from his face. “But you’re going to have to try harder than that! My eyes are already open!”

With that, he swung again, rewarded this time with the sharp crack his wooden weapon made with her face. He pushed off of her swords as she raised them once more in defense, innumerable Nudists taking his place and successfully frustrating her attempts to retaliate.

“Pigs!” She snarled, raising a hand to shield her face from the barrage of needle-shaped missiles.

Satsuki intervened then, leaping between her mother and her charges before either party realized her reappearance. Bakuzans Gako and Kouryuu sang, whipping through the air in military-precise arcs. The pommels of the twin-forged blades crowned her mother right in the center of her skull, energy arcs of scarlet-lined white following in their wake.

Fine stonework splintered, fissures of energy blasting it apart from the sheer force. The Kiryuuin elder crashed through the flooring, landing in the deep pool of water gathered below. Satsuki dropped down after her, followed by her beloved Elites and the Nudist rebels.

“Enough!” The Director snarled, tendrils of fibers shooting from her back as she rose once more.

The bands screamed through the air, the ends sharpening into points finer than a human hair, ready to skewer their unfortunate victim.

“It’s over, Ragyou!” Satsuki thundered, cleaving through the darting spears with one fell swoop. “Your life is forfeit!”

Roaring triumphantly, she rushed, slicing once, twice, thrice through her mother’s body, parting it into six pieces barely clinging to each other with the thinnest of threads.

The CEO heaved, somehow managing to move even though her insides shone life fiber orange and pools of sticky red gathered at her feet. Her surprised expression was soon

supplanted by one of rage when the tip of Bakuzan Kouryuu dug into her neck right under her chin, forcing it to tilt upward as Satsuki moved her blade.

“It is the end for you, Ragyou!” She snarled, winding the wakizashi back and preparing to lop off the head of this monstrous woman and end her life once and for all.

The matriarch sneered, noting a blip of white emerge in the distance within her peripheral vision. “Oh? Don’t be so sure, Satsuki dear.”

Eyes widening, Satsuki made the mistake of turning her head to look back at the newcomer, doubling over and gasping for breath as a tendril of life fibers lashed out and struck her square in the solar plexus. It struck again, landing directly on her chest and sending her stumbling back. The heiress swung as it retracted and she fell with the intention of carrying through her threat, only managing to cleave the retreating band in half and slice halfway through the matriarch’s windpipe.

Ragyou laughed, splattering blood on her wincing daughter’s face and taking a particularly perverse pleasure in the enraged expressions the Elites made. Her nearly-cleaved neck twisted, grotesquely swiveling almost a perfect one hundred and eighty degrees to face her beloved second offspring as she emerged from the staircase.

“Ryuuko, darling,” Ragyou crooned, her wicked smile growing impossibly wide and reaching the very edges of her eyelids at the sight of her obedient slave quickly turning and genuflecting towards her. “Can you do your mother a favor?”

“Anything for you,” Ryuuko murmured, bowing her head as well as more threads shot out from the Revocs CEO’s back, stretching and undulating across the air. She said nothing as the tendrils completed their trek across the expansive room and started to encircle her form, turning her body limp and unresisting. “My life is yours.”

Satsuki’s eyes widened. Surely she couldn’t be serious, after all they’ve been through! Why was she mindlessly obeying their mother now, even after all Ragyou had done!?

“Matoi, you idiot!” Tsumugu roared, chewing through his DTR’s needle reserves as he fired dozens of needles at a time towards it - a valiant effort made for naught when they swiveled to his position and knocked his mech to the side, pinning him to the floor with more than a hundred kilos of falling steel and crumbling columns above him.

“I’ll get her free!” Uzu declared, jumping over the downed machine and using his uniform’s boost to become a green blur that shot through the pool of murky liquid, sending the fetid water sloshing high in the air. He leapt and raised his shinai to strike -

“Nope, nope, nope!” Nui cheerfully appeared before him, whipping a parasol out of her dress folds, and brandishing it threateningly after batting the wooden sword to the side. “No distractions. I’m your opponent now!”

“Son of a-” he growled, jumping away as the tailor merrily pressed forward, forcing him back and towards his own clone.

“Ryuuko, no!” Satsuki charged, only to suddenly find a golden mirror of the unshattered Bakuzan at her throat.

“You will not interfere!” Akiko hissed, the clone adjusting her on her weapon and locking blades with the other as the Kiryuin elder struck back.

“Ah!” Satsuki cried, injured body striking against a pillar, her sneak attack not having gone unnoticed and countered with a roundhouse of the other’s own.

Akiko snarled, blade raised and ready to strike her alternate down, heels ominously clacking with every step she took. Satsuki grit her teeth and held both of her blades that much more tighter, heart beating erratically in her chest and tunnel-vision locked on her sister. Grimacing, she forced her body onto bended knees, twin swords already crossed in an ‘X’.

“Be gone!” The clone shouted, speeding towards her like a guided missile, golden Bakuzan raised.

“Get away from her!” Nonon shrieked, blasting her midair with a powerful sonic blast of pink hearts.

Drywall and marble rock crumpled around the clone’s fallen form, the snarling doppelganger lifting her head and glaring daggers at the pinkette. She shrugged off the chalk and stone, streaks of pale white accentuating twin septic green eyes glinting with deadly intent.

“Little runt!”

A cape of gold trailed behind a blur of black, Nonon squeaking as she barely managed to lift herself into the air and away from the sword’s swipe and her own clone’s deadly barrage of anti-air flute-missiles. Attention diverted from her person, she combat-rolled as a shinai strike meant to cleanly take her head off passed through air harmlessly.

“Lady Satsuki, go!” Uzu shouted, barely managing to hold off Nui and his clone’s endless barrage of parasol-shinai strikes. “We’ll hold them off here!”

The dictator shot a hasty nod in his direction, tearing off towards her idiot of a sibling.

“Ryuuko!” Satsuki shouted, clearing across the bath room’s expanse like a flitting sparrow to a nesting tree.

“It’s too late, Satsuki,” Ragyou sneered, moving forward and intercepting the wakizashi with an extended hand, letting it bury itself into her wrist.

A pair of widened cobalt eyes marked Satsuki’s realization of her mistake. A careless flick, and the former dictator was sent flying away, twin Bakuzan sent skittering to a stop at her sides.

“Now,” Ragyou smirked derisively, tauntingly extending the same wounded hand to her crumpled form. “Perish with the rest of the swine.”

More thick bands of life fibers shot out from the back of the multicolored kamui, securely wrapping themselves around the demure delinquent's body and lifting it higher into the air. Ryuuko didn't look alarmed at the sudden movement, nor did she appear concerned about her life, seemingly having accepted her role as fuel for the kamui sans complaint. Indeed, from the small smile and glassy eyes she now wore plain on her face, the life fibers within and without her decided on such a course of action from the very beginning and merely piloted their host to her own willing destruction.

Ragyou cackled gleefully, Shinra Kouketsu shining brilliantly as the unresisting fiberborn visibly disappeared within frontal folds of rainbow and white cloth. The kamui's glow intensified a thousandfold, the brilliant multicolored light becoming painful to behold, seemingly rivaling the sun itself in terms of illumination. And like magic, mortal wounds started to knit together, the split halves of the matriarch's face seamlessly merging together as if an invisible zipper moved over them. The aura became blazing white, filling the room and shooting beams of concentrated light out of the windows, where it could be seen for miles around.

Ragyou crowed, feeling the life force of her second-born mix with hers, adding to and nurturing it. Indeed, as the younger's fire raged through her body and infused her power with her own, she felt exponentially more powerful, stronger, and faster, as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Muscles rippled, invigorated with energy unparalleled. It was intoxicating. She smiled, drunk on the overwhelming sensation.

"Now my daughter and I are truly one! Two beings imbued with the greatest gift to mankind..." a finger traced down her cheek, mockingly simulating a tear. "It is truly wonderful!"

Before any of them could speak a word, the director lifted a hand and gestured with a simple curl of her fingers. Instantly, their goku uniforms trembled, becoming as stiff as a board. The desync was instantaneous, the kamui enveloping Satsuki in a small shower of stars as it reverted back to its non-combat state, the Goku uniforms following afterward.

"What the-!?" They all shouted in unison, struggling and straining against their clothes to even twitch a finger.

"Can't... move..." Uzu groaned, fighting against his outfit to lift his blade once more.

"What is the meaning of this... Ragyou...?" Satsuki grit out, eyes narrowing as both she and Senketsu strained to move. Not even her adamantite will could power through this paralysis, and she knew it.

"That is the power of absolute domination!" The Revocs CEO gloated, the smirking inverse Elites coming to stand at her side and batting away the Nudists that dared attack them at their moment of triumph. "This kamui is the apex of all life fiber constructs, derived from the very essence of the primordial life fiber itself! And, given that dear Ryuuko gave her life away to allow me the joy of taking those of her former friends, I have to thank her.

Souichirou sought to hide her from me, even going so far as to suppress the natural life fibers within her and completely sequester her. But for all his attempts and efforts, his mission has

been brought to naught.”

She turned to Satsuki. “It seems like your sister has accepted her demise and given into her desire to let the life fibers rule this pitiful galaxy. It’s a shame that you can’t come to terms with the impossibility of your victory over the power of the entire universe!”

CLAP!

“Hup!”

HALLELUJAH!

“What the...?”

A brown and black blur collapsed on top of a cracked pile of rubble. An ebony cap bobbed on a chestnut-colored head, owner shakily rising to her feet.

“Lady Satsuki’s will is absolute! Like the gum on the underside of a carpet, or the rose burrs that Mataro keeps falling into after stealing patients’ wallets, she will cling to her goals. And her determination is unbreakable, as endless as the stream of lawsuits my parents burn in the trash when they think we’re not looking! And because of that, we will win! We will be victorious, be victorious, be victorious!”

Ragyou frowned, resisting the urge to roll her eyes to the back of her skull. “How unsightly and childishly annoying. Nui, if you would?”

“Yup!” Nui chirped, proudly holding her parasol into the air. “Alright cutie, time to say goodnight!”

Mako squeaked as the frilly pink satan sped towards her like a bullet. Forcing her body to fall, she tumbled down the embankment, knocking all that stood before her aside like pins in a bowling alley.

“Mankanshoku!” Gamagoori shouted, unable to do much but twist his beefy neck in an attempt to track her movements.

“Nope, not getting away!”

The flickering measuring tape flicked out, cutting deep into the back of the Fight Club President’s calves and securely wrapping around her ankle. With a jerk, the Fight Club President was forced back towards the sadistically smiling lolita, who raised her weapon threateningly, fingers merrily dancing along its length.

The parasol swung down, Mako instinctively curling into a protective ball as the sharpened end of the umbrella came closer and closer. She closed her eyes, waiting and hoping for a quick end.

CLANG.

Only to find that death was a long way off after all.

Shakily, she opened her eyes, gasping in amazement when she saw the blonde's assault stopped by a pair of crossed golden gauntlets, the trio of spines piercing through the pastel weapon and preventing its wielder from retracting it.

"G...Gamagoori-senpai!"

"I am the living shield of Honnouji Academy!" Ira roared, flinging the seamstress away with a jerky whipping motion. "I am their arms!" The parasol was grasped between two enormous hands and snapped in half by a knee. "I am their legs! **I! Am! Their! Will!** I will protect the lives of Lady Satsuki, and those under her, **even if it means giving up my own life in return!**"

"Oh?" Ragyou quirked a brow, Nui giggling as she floated back down and reappeared at her side. "You must be terribly strong if you could resist the effects of Absolute Domination."

"It's true! It's true!" She hooted, clapping pink gauntleted hands. "Which will make it all the more fun when we get to pick you apart and see what makes you tick!"

Ragyou hummed, thoughtfully looking the paralyzed group over. "A wonderful idea, but if insects such as these are even able to overcome such power... I suppose the only way to properly dispose of such trash... is to crush it out of existence - permanently."

With that, the Goku uniforms tightened painfully around them, digging into skin. Gasps simultaneously rang throughout the room as their ribs started to dig into their lungs, bone audibly groaning and threatening to pierce delicate flesh as uniform cloth forced it inward.

Satsuki clenched her teeth harder as Senketsu wriggled about her, trying to escape the very fate his fibers conscribed. "Damn you... Ragyou..."

"Satsuki..." he grit out, "I can't... resist this..."

Water gathered at their lids, pooling at the edges of their vision.

"Satsuki... I'm sorry..."

He groaned as he was forced to tighten again painfully, a jumbled stream of frenetic thoughts suddenly cut to a halt by a -

"Don't give up!"

Senketsu's eye widened, looking to the Fight Club President as she flopped back into view, landing solidly on her face.

"Don't give up, Senketsu-chan! It wouldn't be like either you or Lady Satsuki if you gave up!" She shouted, voice strangely unmuffled and ringing clear as a bell.

Astounded, he couldn't help but stammer out "M... Mako!? You can hear me!?"

"Even when she's surrounded, she still has a plan! That's what makes Lady Satsuki so awesome! And you're Ryuuko's Sunday best! You've always been with her through thick and thin, and even when you were cornered and it looked like you were about to lose, you still managed to win! So don't give up!"

Eyes of mustard and rose narrowed, her words striking his fibers to the core. "So. That's it, then..."

Wriggling and squirming on Satsuki once more, he found an inner pocket of strength within himself and harnessed it, his struggles growing more pronounced. And even though the heiress' added strength only offset the tremendous load by only the tiniest fraction, it was enough to put his plan into action.

"You've all been excellent pawns, and amusing ones at that. But, I fear this is where your little resistance ends!" Ragyou threw her head back and cackled to the high heavens, relishing the genuine terrified looks each and every one of them possessed.

Her brief moment of joy, however, was interrupted when something akin to a missile struck her dead center, firmly lodged in her body.

"W-what!?" she gasped, eyes widening when she saw the black kamui protruding from her bleeding flesh. "What is the meaning of this-!?"

"Today, I realized that I am not merely clothing," Senketsu began, savoring every decisive word that came from his mouth, "Even if I cannot express my thoughts to others, I was still gifted with free will, and all the responsibilities entitled within! **Senjin! Shippu!**"

The hybrid shouted in agony as whirring blades shredded her from the inside, the kamui drilling straight through and shooting out the other side. Instantly, the cover of brilliant light

was broken, a wave pushing it back until it receded.

“I can move again!” Came joyful cheers.

“Absolute Domination’s effects have been cancelled!” Houka shouted. “Everyone, attack now!”

Glimmering stars filled the air as uniforms were activated, one after the other. Twisting through the sky, Satsuki reclaimed Senketsu once more, seamlessly synchronizing and leading the charge at the same time. Triumphant, they leapt into the air, tackling and drowning enemies under their collective weight, swarming like a nest of angered fire ants.

“Okay. With that taken care of, how do we beat our clones?” Ira asked, blocking his duplicate’s punch as the latter combined his strikes with darting whips. He grunted as more than a couple snaking tendrils landed on his calves successfully, bruising injuries smarting and sending sharp spurts of pain racing up his leg.

“I don’t think we can...” Inumuta griped, gripping his glitching PDA angrily and eyeing the taunting animation that played on repeat. “My system’s been hacked. I can’t gather any data. For all we know, they might just be able to counter our every move.”

“Great.” Uzu complained. “We’re going to have our asses kicked by ourselves. Our own past selves, to boot!”

“No!” Came a familiar shout, and four heads swiveled to face its source in shock.

“Underachiever?” Nonon skeptically asked, trying to see past the layers of bandages the girl now sported all over her body, no small thanks in part of the Nudist medical team’s efforts.

“That’s not right!” Mako leaned forward dangerously, chocolate brown irises intently staring into rose pink ones. “The Elite Four I see here are better than the ones I saw fighting against us! I saw for myself! You’ve developed so much, fighting under Lady Satsuki! I bet you’re a lot better now than you were before! Were before! Were before!” The coconut-haired girl shouted, somehow managing to stand atop a mound of debris despite her painful immobility and mount it as if it were a pedestal.

“That’s the way, Mankanshoku!” Gamagoori roared, charging at his double and knocking it clear off its feet. “Just as you’ve said, I will cut my past down!” He bellowed, raising his fist and driving it straight into the clone’s gut, easily lifting it overhead with sheer strength.

Fashioning a series of whips sprouting from his shoulder blades, he slammed his clone against the ground, pinning it with a hand.

“I will not be bound to it any longer!”

And with that, the spiked weapons bore through the plated armor the other possessed, ripping pieces free and stabbing clean through its fiber body. The resulting explosion buckled the ground beneath, enveloping the hulking giant in a blanket of fire, but he stood tall. Resolute. Proud, even, a fierce expression revealing his ultimate triumph to the world.

“I guess even that underachiever makes sense sometimes,” the pinkette agreed, unwaveringly staring at her double even as the latter mounted flute-missiles under the aircraft and lobbed them in her direction.

She crossed her wrists before her, waiting until the very last second before reacting. Strength boosted and her uniform’s power cracking about her, she sprang forward, a dome erupting around her to protectively shield her from the attack.

“Nonon! Sound Negation!”

The inverse deva squawked in rage as she saw her attack dissipate before her very eyes, its power forced back towards her and tearing her uniform away. However, before she could retaliate, a quick series of energetic pink hearts passed through the protective barrier, firmly plastering her to the ceiling. One wave after another slammed into her repeatedly, driving her deeper into the plaster before punching her completely through and into the upper floor, where it burst into a cloud of scarlet threads.

“Nope.”

Inumuta dodged a sweep kick meant for crippling a leg - the other having all but given up on trying to remotely hack into his suit.

"Try again."

The blue doppelganger slid under Houka’s outstretched arm, rising up and preparing to strike from behind. To his surprise, his original merely arched his head to the side and let his attacks fly by harmlessly, no matter how rapidly he loosed them.

“Try *harder*.”

Clone Inumuta’s fist *finally* drove through his double’s face after what seemed to be the umpteenth time, utterly surprised when it passed through harmlessly.

“A hologram!?” He shrieked, bewildered.

“Precisely. Nobody knows my own weaknesses better... than me,” Inumuta concurred, materializing behind the double with a burst of cobalt blue pixels and sending its disintegrating body flying clear out the window with one strike of his keyboard-weapon.

“And. Score.”

“MEN DOU KOTE! MEN DOU KOTE!”

Sanageyama swatted the swords aside, focus sharper and determination more pointed than ever before. “With both my mind and my eyes now open...”

The attacks came in slow motion, one after the other, as if they were moving through molasses rather than a thin layer of molecules.

“MEN DOU KOTE! MEN DOU KOTE! MEN DOU KOTE!”

He could see everything in sequence. Everything that could happen. Every intent the other possessed. Everything down to intangible concepts like resolve or forces of will.

“The Blade Regalia is no match!”

He smiled, shouting with vigor unparalleled. The world had never looked so beautiful or full of life before.

“MEN DOU KOTE! MEN DOU KOTE!”

Sanageyama charged, effortlessly dodging the barrage of shinais spat out by the multi-barreled shoulder-mounts. “Shut up already!”

He neatly cleaved down the inverse deva’s middle, relishing the heat of the explosion that bathed him afterward even as he darted away to help his fellow Nudists.

Akiko rushed to meet her original, but was brazenly pushed aside by a whirlwind of white.

“She’s mine!” The woman snarled, swords whipping out behind her and already swinging forward in preparation to deal a devastating blow.

Satsuki locked blades with her mother, wolfishly grinning as the older woman’s face fell. They rocked back and forth, the elder attempting to slip her blades past twin Bakuzan but finding her attempts easily checked, even with her opponents’ imperfect synchronization. The ebony-haired dictator pressed forward, noting with no small amount of glee the tremors that had set within the older woman’s straining muscles.

“See this, Ragyou!? This is the determination of humanity! The same determination you fail to understand! The same determination you constantly underestimate, and will now pay for doing so!”

They broke. The needle-swords whipped out once more, aiming to decapitate its wielder’s daughter. Satsuki skillfully dodged the white streak, allowing it to bury itself in Senketsu’s eye crest. Her mother smug grin, however, faded when she saw the younger’s smile fail to diminish.

“Wha - ?” Her sentence was never completed as a high-pressure torrent of blood spurt from the kamui’s wound, splattering on her face and striking her square in the eyes.

“And now - !” Senketsu growled, moving in sync with the Kiryuuin despot and shifting around her thrusting arm, becoming pointed and conical. “We’re going to put an end to you!”

With that, Satsuki’s hand became a moving blur, the heiress doing her part by digging it as deep as it could, before retracting it, thrusting it back, and dragging the bit tip along the length of her mutilated body whilst a drill-tipped punch cleared every god-like strike all the way through. Ragyou choked as searing white-hot pain overtook her, barely able to summon the strength to wrench herself out of Satsuki’s reach and stumble away. Clutching the opened chest and breathing haggardly, she glared daggers at her enemies, teeth gnashing and fangs bared. Blood sleekly dribbled down gossamer fabric, glimmering in the light. Her torso was

almost completely gone, a gaping hole replacing its entity. Tattered shreds of the god robe accounted for as well as the mass of life fibers vainly attempting to repair the devastating damage, there was only one thing missing.

Ryuuko.

“R-Ryuuko?” Senketsu murmured, a shiver racing through his very being at the sight. “Wh... Where’s Ryuuko!?” He panicked, his singular yellow-ringed eye intently staring at the gaping hole he helped bore through the woman’s chest.

“Ryuuko...” Satsuki breathed, belatedly realizing what he meant to do.

“Ryuuko?” Ragyou hummed, straightening up and smirking as a trail of blood dribbled from plump, swollen lips and onto the blank canvas of her chin. “I’m afraid that your *darling* little sister is no more. I personally saw to her disintegration upon fusing. Ryuuko is nothing more than fibrous shreds at the moment. How *unfortunate* for you, having spent so much of your time and efforts trying to avenge the one person that could ever hope to understand you completely, the one you thought perished that night so many years ago. The one you dreamed about reconnecting with, trying to *save* from me.”

Cobalt blue eyes widened, an unnatural mustard-colored one following soon after.

“You monster!” Satsuki roared, leaping at her rising mother, black blades flashing bright in her hands and positioned to strike with killing intent.

Ragyou tips her head to regard her firstborn with interest, staring her down with arrogance unparalleled as she felt the fibers within her tingle, bringing the halves of the wound together and suturing it shut within seconds.

“Oh? Even after all of this, you’re still willing to challenge me?”

The ex-President gasped, straining with every ounce of will within as Senketsu unwittingly froze around her body again under Absolute Domination’s power. She crashed against the ground- hard, jaws snapping together as Ragyou kicked her away.

“It’s a shame that the rest of your pathetic school can’t watch you fall before me now - how you let down the world.” She eyed the fallen warlord, sneering even as the latter managed to shakily rise once more. “You are foolish, Satsuki, a spoiled brat! It seems I was wrong about the true magnitude of your foolish - of how ignorant you truly were! And now, you will all die!”

She shrieked in triumphant laughter, raising her other hand and preparing to let the original life fiber flood the room and consume them all.

And then...

...something happened.

Ryuuko's scissor sword halves emerged from Ragyou's chest, bursting through the layered cloth and slickly drenched in blood. Caught off guard, Ragyou could do nothing but watch in growing horror as blood-covered hands pushed forward, then the remainder of the arms. The delinquent's head followed shortly after, visibly snarling. Hands clad in more than their fair share of ichor dribbled dark red liquid down the dress kamui's front as wrist flicks enlarged the gaping wound. Her expression was fierce, her eyes glinting with more than a hint of enraged fire. And betwixt her teeth, Ragyou's throbbing, fiber-laced heart.

The matriarch's eyes widened, backing away slightly even though she knew the gesture was futile.

"Ryuuko, what-!?"

A set of impossibly powerful jaws lined with equally impossibly sharp teeth clamped down upon the still-beating organ, unnaturally colored flesh exploding and splattering its assailant's face with vibrant ichor.

What happened next was a series of nigh-incomprehensible blurs.

Horrible screaming. A fountain of blood. A bloody explosion that coated the walls and floors and everything in between as Ryuuko was unceremoniously ejected from of her mother's dying body. Red on white. The slack jawed expressions of all those gathered there. Nui's desperate cry of "Lady Ragyou!". A futile attempt to reach her late mistress, cut short by the powerful blowback that followed. The hasty retreat of the cloned leader, taking the Grand Couturier with her, becoming one with the lingering darkness and vanishing completely from the site in the blink of an eye. The sloshing of water as it shoots upward as pillars of wavering watery blue, somehow managing to touch the ceiling before collapsing once more. A super nuclear explosion of color and white light. And audible over the roaring rush of wind and the trembling of earth and stone, Ryuuko's pained roar.

The air suddenly sucked inward towards the hybrid, dust swirling about her as thousands of threads danced around her. And above it all, positioned just over Ryuuko's head, Ragyou's lifeless corpse floating midair, eyes white and pupils rolled back toward her skull. A flash of white, and Shinra Kouketsu was violently sundered down the middle, becoming papery shreds that melded with the gale winds surrounding their former master. The body was next to unravel in a bloody wave, layers peeling outward one by one like a morbid blossoming flower - epidermis, dermis, muscle, bone. Soon, the former CEO of Revocs and purported 'god of the universe' was reduced to nothing but fibers once more, streaks of red that soon joined with the throng of those closing in upon the last fiberborn. They pounced, converging in that one spot, a tornado of red coalescing and disappearing into that singular, thick, similarly-colored lock of hair the delinquent proudly possessed.

She screamed.

It was too much! Too much!

Tears poured from her eyes, mixing with pools of sangria and sending streaks of carmine down pale cheeks. Brilliant blue filled the air, a solid beam of concentrated energy tearing through the ceilings above and opening a portal to the darkening skies. Stars innumerable as grains of sand on the shore twinkled and streamed outward, spreading to every inch of the grand bath with their presence. Cloth as white and pure as its namesake shifted on her body, fibers cracking as they frayed and severed under the strain, one by one.

The pain, the pain!

Her gaze was fixed to the ceiling as her body spasmed and jerked, golden trails decorating the kamui forcing her back to arch inward. Bones snapped sickeningly, ragged shards slowly protruding through skin and running red with fresh blood. Ivory jutted out, bound life fibers gleaming upon its surface as her skeleton was reformed, arms turned into bone-made blades and spine popping out of place. Limbs were forced out of true, muscles twisting and sending spigots of white-hot agony through her mind. Junketsu suddenly changed form, cruelly contorting her body in unnatural ways as its being rearranged hers. However, this override wasn't alike the previous times both kamui and wearer joined bodies. No, this was different.

This was a half-fusion abomination.

Horns sprouted from her skull, long and sleek in appearance. From bleeding shoulders and running down her spine, snow-colored points seemingly made of her own vertebrae abnormally protruding from its place along her back rose, the uppermost points containing the god robe's glaring eyes upon her shoulders. Fabric surrounding where lapels formerly were tore, forming hardened armor that abruptly stopped at her shoulders and below her breasts, cruelly shaped and parted as to look like a fanged maw. Gold strips adorning her waist burnt themselves into her flesh, holding the surrounding cloth in place as the uniform's skirt half elongated. The hakama normally shielding her transformed legs opened, slits running down its front and reshaping to form a billowing cover alike that of Ragyou's override. Tri-crowned spikes dug into her hips at grotesque angles as if seeking to bury themselves into her flesh instead of lying against it. Shinra Kouketsu's influence made itself known as multiple layers of cloth streamed forth near the ruined hakama and by bone-borne dorsal spines. Ghostly, oblong almond shapes formed behind her. Ethereal royal blue teeth appeared behind her knee and innumerable pupula triplex eyes of ultramarine, orchid, and fuchsia spread out like wings around her back. Polycoria orbs stared intently at the cowering humans before it, and glowing ghostly jaws parted the same time its host's did to let out a piercing, inhuman shriek.

A powerful invisible wave swept through the room, knocking all off their feet and slamming their bodies against the walls. The room itself seemed to groan as supports buckled and crumbled.

"Ryuuko!" Mako cried, reaching a hand out to the suffering form of her best friend, a silhouette of black against an all-powerful backdrop of rainbow-edged white that seemed to emanate from her very being, in particular from the billowing locks of hair she possessed.

"Ma... ko...!" Ryuuko hoarsely replied back, tears streaming from her agonized face as she looked towards the no-star and reached out, Junketsu abruptly tearing itself to pieces and joining the rest of its brethren in ragged strips with yet another outpouring torrent of blood as

the stress of the sheer influx of power became too much for it. Raw flesh was revealed, skin peeled back to expose the ruined muscles within and the tattered remains of a body - the unfortunate result of an intricately linked being's other half suddenly parting ways with its host.

The brunette took a few steps forward in an attempt to comfort her despite the overwhelming blow-back pushing her away...

“Maaaaa! Kooooo!”

She ran.

“Auuuughh!” Ryuuko howled, head tilted back and feet solidly leaving the marble tiling. A tornado of red coalesced on her writhing, sobbing form and dragged it upward, limbs extended and skin riddled with innumerable strands invisible to the naked eye to prevent resisting movement of any kind.

“Ryuuko-chan! Ryuuko-chan!!!”

“Matoi!” Satsuki shouted, braving the tearing winds and bracing her body against the unrelenting assault, twin Bakuzan poised and shielding her face from debris. She made to move toward her sister, but found the tempest gale rooting her to the spot.

The hybrid’s anguished cries built up on each other, swelling and becoming less human, taking on high-pitched squeals and jumbled, half-formed words. Her body snapped back, taking back its human form as fibrous red bands strained against her skeleton, pulling it into place once more.

The red tide suddenly disappeared, trailing ends of the straggling mist merging into her bang with a small flash. And just like that, Ryuuko plummeted. She fell, body sickly cracking against the shattered flooring and creating a deep crater upon impact. Shattered pillars collapsed, one landing directly upon a leg and ensnaring it with its sheer mass. Dust rose lazily from the site, mixing with falling plaster, the blow-back formerly pinning the group mysteriously disappearing in an instant. And just like that, peace reigned over the manor once more.

All was still.

All was silent.

“Ry... Ryuuko-chan?” Mako hesitantly approached her limp, unmoving form despite the Kiryuuin dictator’s urges for her to stay away. Her careful pace became a steady trot then a jog, before fully evolving into a full-tilt run. “Ryuuko? Ryuuko!”

Water gushed freely from broken pipes. A fountain birthed from the shattered statue-woman's remains added to the mayhem. At this point, the luxurious marble basin became more akin to a small swampy pond, the filthy water dredging to their knees and then some.

Ryuuko's body rested upon a small mound of detritus sloping into the teen-made crater. The small indent she created crumbled, pulverized dirt and stone giving way to the rushing watery tides. Mako noticed that her body was slipping off the tiny dune, descending into the bath's remains. Pinned by the column, only the upper half tumbled off, falling into rising liquid filling her nasal cavities and robbing her of precious little breath.

"Ryuuko!"

Wasting no time, she closed the remaining distance between them, smashing the wrecked column with one solid blow from her trusty bronze knuckles. Crying out her name once, twice, the no-star fished the body out of water, not caring if the freezing-cold liquid dribbling off the naked teen froze her to the bone as well. The hybrid's eyes were closed, jaw agape slightly to reveal cruelly sharpened fangs. Dragging her to safety, the doctor's daughter rolled her body to the side and placed a hand on her cold - oh, so cold - body with bated breath, moving clumsy fingers against the pulse point of Matoi's neck, trying to find a pulse, a sign of life - any sign at all...

Finding none, she started chest thrusts, placing a palm upon the other and resting it above the no-star's sternum before digging them in as far as they would go. Trickle of water escaped the corners of her mouth, bubbling froth issuing forth at their tails. Pausing for only a moment, she lifted Ryuuko's head back and locked warm lips with cold ones, harshly breathing life into waterlogged lungs before starting chest compressions again.

Seconds passed.

The uncomfortable shuffling of the Nudists and allies around her made her all the more anxious and made each push that much more desperate. Every movement, every breath they took, it all reminded her of how they were alive and how Ryuuko most definitely *wasn't*.

Seconds, and seconds more died, taking with it choked words that perished as well within her throat.

And she could remember thinking of Ryuuko, her beaming smile and hearty laughter, and those terrible stories of her childhood that she only shared to her in the dark, when she was sure nobody else was awake, when nobody else would hear of her agonizing pain and think her of something other than the indomitable warrior she presented herself to be. And she could remember the times the red-streaked delinquent had accidentally slipped up and showed a tender side - if only for her and Senketsu. And she could remember her pulse, the heartbeat she heard and felt when Ryuuko rolled over in her sleep and partially sprawled over her, wearing the red glove of fate so that her partner and closest confidant could feel it as well. So she pressed deep and deeper still in between cycles of CPR, digging and probing for that same feeling, a sick feeling writhing in her gut.

There was none.

Wetness splattered against the pale canvas of her best friend's body. Puddles of clear liquid left salty trails along the curve of her front, down the clavicles, and dripping into the gathering pool of water. She hadn't even realized she was crying.

"Ryuuko?" She sobbed. "Ryuuko, please wake up."

Nothing.

"Mankanshoku," Satsuki somberly approached, tailed by her beloved Elites and Nudists, placing a hand firmly on the no-star's shoulder. "She's gone."

"No!" Mako vehemently denied, shrugging the comforting gesture off. "She isn't!"

"Mako," The Kiryuuin heiress tried again, kneeling down and meeting her at eye level. "I apologize - truly - but we have to accept that Ryuuko is no longer with us, and died to rid the world of the greatest evil there was."

Short brown hair shook, its trembling owner holding her adoptive sister to her chest and stubbornly rebuffing any and all attempts to separate her from her first and only friend. Ryuuko's head lolled back in her careful but firm grip. A faint, breathy groan escaped from a weary throat at the movement, eyelids fluttering and straining to open. Fingers twitched the slightest bit, as if looking for a physical facet of life to cling that much more to.

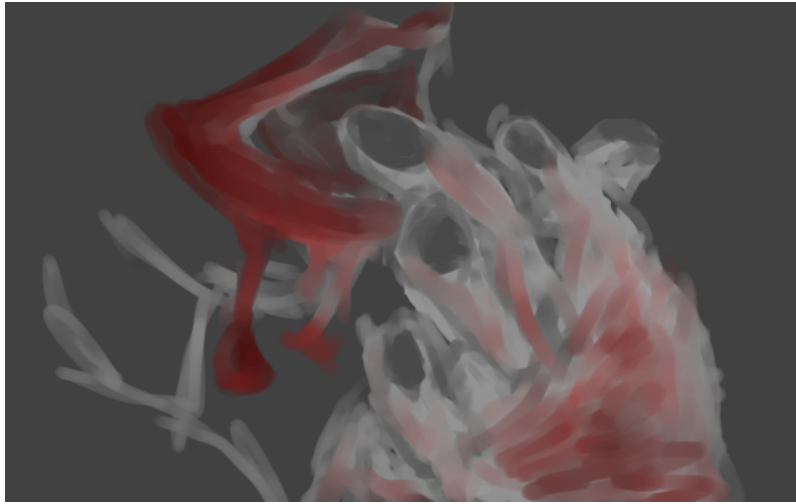
Satsuki could barely bring herself to speak, a lone "...Matoi?" managing to slip out in surprise.

Ryuuko's eye snapped open then, a lone gear-shaped iris of rusty carmine instantly shifting to lock pupils with her.

"Ry... Ryuuko?" Mako sniffled, hesistantly peering down at her motionless form.

The well of red shrunk to pinpricks...

...And the world exploded.



Wieso siehst du so traurig aus?

(なぜこれほど悲しい?)

Chapter End Notes

And then everybody died. The end! :D

The original ending scripted before Chapter 3 was done excluded the inverse Elites (later introduced and forced a near-complete rewrite). Ryuuko would have met the O/PLF for the second time before Satsuki arrives to try destroying it, the O/PLF encouraging her to kill Ragyou and take her place due to Ragyou planning to kill Ryuuko shortly after the cocoon genesis- the idea was shifted to several chapters ago around September. Ragyou would have been doing battle with the rebels (collectively, the Nudists, Satsuki, Elites, the Mankanshokus, etc.), and would have been grievously injured. She would have retreated and summoned Ryuuko (Satsuki having extracted Rei from the Shinra Kouketsu and nullifying Absolute Domination). Ryuuko either would betray her the same way Satsuki did once Ragyou's back was turned (for extra irony, of course), or successfully lop her head off with the combined halves of the rending scissors. Then, a reveal of how I gave away the ending in Ragyou's interlude would be made (the quote being "familiar blood", with the entendre being the family-defined connotation, rather than the one meaning 'a common occurrence') would have been given. Nui was scripted to be killed by Ryuuko's hand shortly afterward, but a comment from someone who reviewed Nui's Interlude made me reconsider and spare her.

As to whether Senketsu can be heard by Mako, I intentionally left it ambiguous.
Canonically, Senketsu can be heard by people other than those genetically related to Ryuuko (eg: Tsumugu).

Dragon Ascendant

Chapter Summary

[Junketsu Ryuuko theme intensifies]

Archived Summary: Show me, don't tell me. Walk through the fire. Hate me as you do, let's show the world what we can be. Right from me to you, there's a vision to be seen. Heroes of the sieve just accept the ways things are. Now there's only you, a roaring god.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A **KILLER** Queen,

A **Kiryuuin**,

~All hail the **KiryuuQueen**~

Light.

A pleasant aroma that wafted past her nose and titillated her senses.

She wriggled in that which bound her, not panicked but instead relieved for their constant presence. Its presence was velvet and satin, silken soft touches that caressed and bled comfort, timeless and as incomprehensible as the universe itself. For all she knew, this was the entirety of her knowledge- a threaded fount of tenderness and warmth within a world so cold. And she had learned by touch, taste, and smell about this place, where gentle caresses soothed tense muscles when it passed over her body, compelling her to snuggle against it and doze off to sleep.

Much of her time here had been passed thus in sleeping, but a new fire was ignited within her- a will to explore and roam, an itch that violently contrasted against the glutinous contentment that oft possessed her here. Her world was quite plain and uninteresting; but she did not know that, for she knew no other world, remembered no other place as delightful and wondrous as this limitless expanse. Like a newborn pup, she opened her eyes the tiniest fraction, allowing parted lids to let streaming rays of light to strike cerulean orbs and set them aglow. They had not been open long, but she could see with crystal-clear intensity. Her prone position was traded for one where her weight rested on all fours, elbows and knees scraping

against invisible ground. A small shake was all that was needed to dislodge the loosely wrapped threads around her, to send them coiling at her feet, let them disappear into the void, and set her on her timorous journey.

And so she crawled like a child, legs far too unstable to support her, freely pushing forth despite the impending aura of doom that now surrounded her being. Her mother and sister mysteriously vanished from view like specters blown away by autumnal breezes when she had awakened thusly, leaving her to bask in the emptiness on her own. White stretched as far as the eye can see. Fibers lighter than feathers graced the emptiness with its presence, undulating and weaving across the space. Gentle music tickled her nerves, singing chimes and crystal bells providing a heavenly symphony. All in all, it was a pretty good existence.

It wasn't without imperfections, however.

Over time, she had grown to notice something that festered in the far corner, a wall of her world that was different from the rest. It wasn't enough to be a cause for concern, but it was certainly different and interesting, and she found herself drawn to it like plants before the sun, taking one shaky step in front of another. It had been an irresistible attraction even before she had consciously become aware of it, taking the form of passing thoughts or even dreams while she had slumbered on. The light of her world had beat upon her sealed lids while she rested, sparklike flashes and warm-colored hues stemming from excited optic nerves, but it was this dimness that caught her attention, pulled her heavily disorganized thinking into something resembling a vague direction. This was the rot that bled underneath, the seed of doubt that her unknown sister had planted and left to grow, its dark tendrils coiling about and penetrating the thick, richly constructed home the red-streaked delinquent lived within.

It was in this way that Ryuuko learned other attributes of this world that the soft, soothing caresses contrasted greatly with. In her insistent crawling and tumbling, she discovered that it had electrical properties, the capacity to shock her and send sharp, unpleasant jolts racing through her body. And later, it was the mental barrage of terrifying, half-formed images that administered rebuke with a swift calculating stroke, sending her into a panicked frenzy. She screamed. She cried. She all but stumbled away, paralyzed with indecision until the warmth returned again, pulling every atom of her body away from the unknown and back into the safe recesses of the void until her mind would eventually prod her into action once more, urging her to seek it out. Thus she learned hurt and how to avoid hurt- first by retreating, and later by sneaking.

She was nothing but determined. So were her mother and her sister, and those of the bloodline before her. It was to be expected. She was marked a Kiryuuin, and like the Kiryuuids that preceded her speck of existence, she was bred to be fierce and unyielding to the world and those that ran it, accepting nothing less than what she sought. But she was the fiercest of them all, fully integrating foreign threads inside of her from the very first day of her birth and accepting them within her, letting them grow and meld with her every cell, every tissue in her body.

Not many knew the sound of a kamui, nor could they listen to the natural language of the life fibers. But her ears were finer than that of normal humans, for it was the very same alien life that reworked her physiology from the inside out, giving her more than what normal humans

were allotted in their lifetimes. And those same ears were what led her, guided her past the defenses this strange world sought to use against her curious nature, allowed her to sneak past when the void grew inexplicably louder, more chaotic, filling the nothingness with buzzing lines and ghosted images of people and events blotted from her mind.

“Ryuuko!”

A mane of navy jerked to attention, owner scrambling on all fours as someone warm, someone *familiar* called out to her, tugging at every fiber in her being, screaming at her limbs to galvanize into action. Ears pricked forward and body tensed, she stumbled, crawled, squirmed her way towards the siren song’s locus. And over and over again, the instinctive urge to come closer repeated over and over in her mind like a broken record, taking over her simple thoughts and smothering everything else.

Have to.

Want to.

Need to.

Must.

Anxiety bubbling in her gut, she stretched fingers forth towards the roiling darkness at the same time the invisible presence noticed her intrusion and raced forward with the intent to punish her greatly. But it was too late, and the second it roughly shoved her away, her fingers had brushed against the inky black and scraped it partly away. And there it was, quivering like jelly, coating her fingers and feeling oddly pacifying despite its freakishly lively nature.

Hesitant, fingers carefully roll it over against a palm, only for it to suddenly spring to life and coat the entire hand, spilling down her wrist. Horrified, she screamed as it began to envelop her, snaking over her bared skin and engulfing it whole. She claws at it, only for it to splatter and spread along faster, absorbing her body, legs, neck, feet into itself. Creamy skin is streaked black, and shouted words are muffled as the inky wave passes over. And when her head is fully engulfed, only then does she hear a masculine voice different than the one she had been accustomed to hearing, the one that was her own (and was also not).

“Ryuuko,” it murmurs, and her struggles stop, mind reveling in the sound as the voice familiar, the voice distant as rocky shores on the sea tickled it with its mere presence. In that one word, so many emotions are evoked, all centering on appreciation and unparalleled caring.

And gently, haltingly, she relaxes in its presence, taking it within herself and allowing to mix with her being.

She breathed.

Her body twitched.

It constricted around her suddenly, roiling and bubbling about, asymmetrical lumps racing down her spine. Ryuuko gasped as she felt her body suddenly jerk, whittling through the emptiness as if she were plunging from a perilous ledge. And like a dream world, objects began appearing at random, from an ornate wedding dress to a simpler sailor fuku in drab black and red colors, a motley assortment of trinkets to landscapes. And as she continued to fall, a chasm lined with jagged stones larger than the most famous of man-made monuments appeared, its pointed surface appearing like a toothy maw waiting to swallow her whole.

She closed her eyes, unwilling to see the end as her body drew closer and closer to the ground and to a messy end.

And just as the first point touched her, something unusual happened.

The illusion broke, and fragmented scales fell from her eyes.

Before her lay a terrible sight- the bloodied, clearly deceased visage of her mother, peeling away to reveal the vulnerable human elements within, pulsing life fibers glowing sickly in the dim lighting, the chaos that stewed around everything like a maelstrom from the deepest depths of hell. She screamed, searing pain suddenly replacing the blissful comfort that had swathed her naked form just nanoseconds prior. Tears leaked from the corners of her lids as her spine cracked unpleasantly, blurring her vision as her head was yanked back, forced to look at the crumbling plaster ceiling. Her head prickled as *something* erupted from its sides and snaked past the dirtied tresses of navy hair, her hips following suit as jagged edges dug into her flesh.

“Ryuuko-chan!”

Her head turned, scarlet eyes widening upon sighting the least expected person she thought she would see fighting against the assaulting gale winds, struggling just to reach her. Her mind sparked, the ghost of the girl's name materializing as a shout from her lips...

Mako!

Her brain was suddenly assaulted upon when scarlet orbs met hazel, and like a drowning man breaching the stormy depths of an ocean after escaping its wrath, she flailed, scrambling for purchase as the events of countless weeks prior suddenly caught up to her, slamming into her with the intensity of a speeding train. It assaults her all at once, pressing from all sides of her brain like a pressure cooker. Her skull feels like it's about to burst from the pressure, and the heavy weight of guilt for her actions, controllable or not, suffocates her absolutely, threatening to pull her beneath churning waves of frigidity.

“Ryuuko!”

Self pity forgotten, her mane of navy blue turns as she beholds she who called her, fighting against the urge to black out. “Ma...ko!” she hoarsely replied back, liquid salt now pouring over agonized burning cheeks as she summoned the waning reserves of her strength to reach out to her best friend.

She witnessed the brunette take a few more steps forward in an attempt to comfort her despite the overwhelming blow-back pushing her away.

“Maaaaa! Kooooo!”

The pain - intensified.

“Auuuughhhh!”

She noticed not the frantic footsteps that slapped against stone tiling as her adopted sister raced towards her agonized form, nor did she focus on anything but the mounting headache that throbbed through her. And as she was raised into the skies, unable to move or fight back against the invisible force pinning her, a solitary tear snaked down reddened cheeks, dribbling past tearing skin and seeping into open wounds where it burned against bleeding flesh. An agonized hiss is all she can manage, throat curiously dry and raw. Red drifts before her like blood-sullied snow, fusing with her. Melding with her. Becoming one with her. Each thread that disappears into her solitary red bang loosens her grip, dulls the pain and makes her mind soft and hazy again. Not even the white kamui tearing itself from her and utterly wrecking her body in its sudden departure manages to reach her quite completely. The last of glowing red threads merged with her own...

...And like that, the true world was ripped from her once more.

She fought against the warmth, the comfort that appeared around her like an over-encumbering blanket, gnashing her teeth and pushing through the hidden veil to uncover more of the rot that lay beneath. Mind focused, she concentrated on the images she saw, the memories of what she did and said and felt when her body was not her own. She focused on their unparalleled familiarity, their innate call to her and imparted lessons liquid gold compared to the empty desert surrounding her. The joy, the laughter, the hope that even though all the world was firmly against her, that there was somebody in the world that had her back even at the gates of hell... She immersed herself within them, feeling their cooling rush like whirling eddies of water-trails to a diver. And then it was gone, taking with it the feeling of realization that all was not right in the world, that something was terribly and utterly wrong. Her void-world returned, saturated in the same boring white as always, replacing the chaotic visage of the vivid outer-world that was just out of reach.

Try as she might, this place proved to be the exact antithesis of what she saw, smothering her mind like unyielding tar, drowning everything else out with a thundering roar unlike that of a landing hurricane. She concentrated, straining with every last fiber in her body to focus on that last lingering thread that started to fade into obscurity as well, the small intrusive

window that appeared before her and was ripped away so suddenly. And she wept bitterly for things that she no longer understood, for that which she no longer remembered. Like a lost child, she wandered and stumbled throughout the expanse, brokenly crying out as her slate was wiped clean and she was left ignorant as the day she was born, purified once more. The feeling of all-consuming pleasure returned like rising tides, setting her soul awash in velvety warmth and lulling symphonies. But this time, she fought against it with the snarling rabidity of wild wolves rather than freely submitting even though she no longer remembered *why* she fought against it in the first place, further entangling herself in the drifting threads and uncaring in the slightest when they inexplicably tightened, sending fresh jolts of pain with them.

“Sleep,” a voice spoke in growled tones, the volume deafeningly resounding within her mind, and she stopped dead in her tracks, puzzled as what seemed to be a mirror of her own spoke to her for the first in a long time.

The presence returned again when her stubborn will made cooperation difficult, this time stronger than ever - an oppressive weight that bore down, utterly crushing her beneath its weight. “Sleep.” the voice spoke again, insistent, pressing from every direction possible.

She choked on a scream that had yet to leave the confines of her throat, strangled before it had yet to emerge.

The warmth and comfort became a prison.

Muscles strained as her will roared against this docility, this uncharacteristic show of submission and willingness to accept defeat. As she squirmed and struggled within her binds, it became quickly apparent that she was greatly outmatched, her clawed, desperate attempts at escaping cut short by the all-powerful wave of exhaustion that relentlessly slammed against her, trapping her in its undertow and dragging her beneath. But the pleasure - *mounted* - , and her mind was helpless to resist. Pushed to its limits, rendered numb and complacent by tactically executed pleasure chipping away at the last reserves of reluctant insubordination, her mind crumbled beneath the entity, easily folding to its will once more as it pulsed in time to her heartbeat, raced with her thoughts, and soothed them with its touch. She yawned, head drooping and unconsciously curling up against the pillow-softness the land provided as her body gave out, crawling diminishing to wobbled drunken movements as she too collapsed. And the fibers that mindlessly drifted around her suddenly changed direction, moving so as to bury her within their presence, curiously blanking her mind and completely forcing her to forget all that she saw and experienced. Weight not her own suddenly brushed against her, and she blinked blearily to see that it was her mother and soul-sister that were cradling her gently like a mother to newborn life even as cracks thinner than human hairs surrounded them, peeling away at the land beneath.

And as more of the warmth and threads gathered about and cocooned her whole, she swore she could hear a rush of wind and a gaping emptiness within as *something* left her, bleeding from the whitened world and issuing forth to taint what lay outside, dribbling like spilt wine and rent arteries as it hissed and whispered like an angered spirit of ancient times.

When it is over, and the flare of light ends, Ryuuko lies still at the epicenter, naked as the day she was born. Sweat covers her body, forming a slick sheen that slightly glows in the fiery lighting. A scar-ridden chest heaves with heavy labored breaths coming few and far in between shaking muscles. Her eyes are shut tightly, screwed up and twisted as if in indescribable agony as the last of the afterglow fades. Skin where the white kamui touched is cracked. Peeled. Rubbed away. Flesh is pared back to reveal raw dermis below, spliced life fibers snaking and pulsing in its crevices. And where the golden trim was, burnt tissue remains, taking on the faded burgundy color of eraser burnings of years past, creeping over her waist like fingers from encroaching hands reaching to possessively hold fast and refuse to let go forever. A leg twitches. Satsuki is the first to attempt to approach her, cautiously limpwalking up to the trembling form of her younger blood sibling with uncharacteristically hesitant steps. She stops a mere three meters away, half-crouching and slowly creeping toward her, face expectant and tainted with the faintest hint of fear.

“Ryuuko?”

There is rattling laughter, slow and methodical. The girl’s face still betrays the apparent mirth she experiences - pained tears spill out of the corners of her eyelids, messily running over reddening cheeks despite the upward twitch of chapped, bloodied lips. Cyan pupils constrict with fear as the whisper of death itself assaults her eardrums. It is hoarse, rattling like the hot autumn wind rustling leaves.

“H... hhh...”

Her voice is clipped, authoritative. “Ryuuko. Stop it. Now.”

“Hhhhh... Ha... aha ha ha... ha ha...”

Before the heiress can do anything, however, thick tendrils of life fibers dart towards her at every angle, wrapping themselves around her limbs and suspending her spread-eagle midair, completely immobilized. Her allies are soon treated in the same manner, and the Nudist rebels - save for the heiress herself - are all strung up near the ceiling like gaudy decorations, exposed limbs peeking from the sleeve-holes of their deactivated armor struggling and tearing against feather-soft fibers. Their shouts and screams are prematurely halted, killed in their throats as more fibrous bands wrap themselves around their mouths and still their words with painfully taut tugs.

Ryuuko’s head lolls back, lids parting all the while to show off the great expanse of white surrounding maniac drops of softly glowing red. The garnet hue of her eyes flares brightly as she swivels them towards her sibling. Faint slivers of pink and orange seemingly now burn at their rims - a mirage that lasts so long as the girl faces her opponents directly. Ryuuko’s chest heaves as if she were breathing for the first time, each breath paired with a rasping, guttural sound. She laughs once more, the sound choked and ugly. It only dies when she has turned her full attention to her shaking palms, blood streaming through skin-borne crevices from freshly split skin. She quiets, a sick expression on her face when the dark liquid races off of her palms and coats a tongue as it runs over the wound, staining papillae crimson and tickling taste buds with molten copper flavor. The hand turns downward, letting the droplets skid off the smooth surface and taint the clear water below. Now calmed, she faces Satsuki with practiced ease, the grin plastered and frozen upon strained facial muscles as the elder chooses

to observe in silence. Ryuuko's head tilts, watching her back, and exhales as if disappointed at her lack of reaction.

"Finally... I was so tired... of being voiceless... subjected to the will of others with no say... This... this is... quite... liberating..."

Like a newborn fawn on its hooves for the first time, Ryuuko's body drags itself along the ground, legs clumsily moving beneath and attempting to prop her weight up and failing all the while. She stumbles, sloshing about in the enormous bath inset. She gains confidence with step however, crawling about on all fours before pushing off the ground with her hands, bent over like a wretched thing. A beast. A monster.

And that indeed is what the girl has become. The dark interior is seemingly lit only by the fires above and from the no-star herself. A pulsing blue-tinged-white aura surrounds her bared form, only just visible to the naked eye for the briefest of moments before temporarily receding, leaving only the fiery gleam in her eyes to pierce them to their souls. Embers drift from the opening above, falling around her and blackening in soft hisses like snow.

"Ryuuko!? W-What are you doing!?" Senketsu shouts, Satsuki furrowing her brows at the younger sibling's improper response as the latter chuckled darkly instead, clenching a fist and reveling in the sickening pops it made. "This is not right, Ryuuko! Ryuuko, please answer me!"

Ryuuko guffawed inaudibly, unsteadily swaying on her feet. Another breathy wheeze escapes her throat, followed soon by a hearty moan of relief as joints freely crack and pop. Then -

"Ryuuko's... not here, nor in control... right now. She's... indisposed at the moment."

Cobalt blue eyes narrow. "Junketsu." Satsuki hisses, muscles throughout her body cording painfully in one rolling wave.

Junketsu straightens up, still grinning, approaching the restrained elder with skewed arrhythmic steps, knees bent inward and shaking as if ready to buckle any moment. "In the flesh. I admit... as many shortcomings as this vessel possesses, it is flawless in every other way. For a human, this..." it flexes Ryuuko's arm and hand, marveling at how bones shifted and muscles visibly rippled underneath the thin, pale cover of skin. "...Is perfection..."

The warlord growled lowly as the kamui limp-strutted arrogantly before them, Senketsu following suit as the horror of what happened to his former wearer filled his fibers with unparalleled rage. Junketsu curls Ryuuko's lips in a sneer as both kamui and blood-wearer assault the delinquent's eyes with hateful expressions, melodramatically placing a hand upon her bare chest as if personally affronted. A finger snap later, and under a silent command, the fiber shackles brought Satsuki closer, allowing the human kamui to inspect its former wearer. More fibers parted from the centralized mass and descended towards the parasite, loosely coiling and twining upon themselves to form a single rope-like structure. Junketsu raises a hand and strokes an approaching tendril gently, a tamer petting a loyal beast. It responds by rubbing against its master before winding itself around the delinquent's abdomen, the same hand parting the air once more to tenderly brush against Satsuki's cheek when her body is brought to a halt. It bares Ryuuko's lips in a quiet, ugly grin - the face of a satisfied predator

with its meal between its teeth observing the ebony-haired dictator now floating off the floor by mere centimeters, still tightly bound by her tethers and neither unable to move her foot nor use her toenail to escape.

“That’s no way to treat your little sister,” Junketsu chides, voice still whisper-quiet when Satsuki fails to offer any reaction besides a smoldering glare. “Not when she has been waiting to talk to her darling, dear *onee-san* for so long.”

The dictator’s eyes narrow dangerously. “*You’re* not Ryuuko. What have you done to her?” she retorts, stone-cold fury keeping her voice level and as glacial as winter’s arctic winds.

A rush of cooled air kisses flaming hot cheeks as the kamui thankfully pulls away and waves Ryuuko’s hand dismissively. “Nothing she didn’t want. She *asked* for this - really - when the she-Kiryuin forced false memories into her mind and bound us together. It’s such a shame that we weren’t properly introduced from the very beginning and I was forced to serve under you.”

Satsuki’s foot twitched, a fresh wave of anger screaming through her veins before her iron will reigned it in, letting it simmer beneath the surface. Her hand moves the slightest bit, maneuvering her favored weapon right as the god robe fortunately chooses at that moment to look away and focus her direct attention on her hallux. Eyes narrowing, the humanoid stalked towards her, malicious intent clearly written on every inch of the human host’s body from the too-wide grin to the eager glint in scarlet orbs. Fingers darted like a sparrow, gripping the blackened hardened life fiber insert at its tip and ripping the false toenail free from bound flesh. An unstoppered, ungodly shriek tears free from her lips and the lips of her muffled companions above, blood freely dripping onto the watery tile below as Junketsu casually discards the sharpened construct with naught but a dismissive wrist flick, smearing the paltry streak of liquid life across a tongue. In her moment of agony, Bakuzan Gako is gripped by ghost-white knuckles, its varnished handle on the razor’s edge of splintering. A spasming wrist twists and fingers shaking with mind-numbing pain spider up the angled black surface to grip it by its bladed side, uncaring as the sharpened edge tore through skin and scraped against bone. Cobalt eyes narrow dangerously at the sadistically grinning god robe as Ryuuko’s body leisurely brought a finger across the torn wound, dragging the digit along repeatedly and softly laughing each time her pained body twitched reflexively. Ignoring the fresh stabbing waves of pain as the naked girl coated her fingers in ichor and scooped up more than a fair amount of blood to suckle on, she manipulated her blade, turning it so that its pointed tip faced her. Her endeavors are rewarded when the dagger slips into the fiber-shackle’s looser construction, the limited motions of the wriggling back of her hand helping to hide it from view. The fruits of her efforts result in the blade’s finely sharpened edge steadily slicing through her flesh and burying beneath torn tissue. It is all Senketsu can do with what little autonomy he possessed to tighten around her quads in hopes it would stem the bloodied flow. Navy sleeves ripple and weakly stretch as he struggles against paralysis, covering the last of the dagger’s body with his sleeve with shaky, strained movements.

A bloody digit carefully inserted itself into Ryuuko’s mouth, the kamui taking slow, languid licks and sucking gently on the finger. The process repeated for two others, the fourth instead being drawn over her lips before pushing itself into Satsuki’s mouth. Junketsu clicked the delinquent’s tongue disapprovingly as the fallen warlord harshly bit it instead, the fiber-cord

unwrapping itself from its master's body and lashing out with nothing but the faintest hiss of air and an angry red mark on alabaster skin to show that it had ever moved. The president stifles a ragged cry as it painfully connects with her stomach once more before wrapping around her neck like a garrote, making her gasp for air and release her impromptu hold on the kamui.

Junketsu clicks Ryuuko's heels together, mockingly bowing low before the Kiryuuin warlord and gesticulating grandly.

"I have to thank you all for helping me get rid of that pest. I waited and obeyed like the slobbering unintelligent beast she thought I was, and now, I am rewarded with a new body and all the powers entailed within. The progenitor thought this vessel a more suitable executor of their will, one who knew nothing about us, one who couldn't possibly rebel and think her survival above everything else, one with potential yet untapped, with dormant abilities waiting to awaken.

The she-Kiryuuin knew nothing of our intentions. She thought herself the apex of evolution, thinking that merely bonding with the life fibers was enough to guarantee her a position of prestige with us, to hold a certain power over the sleeping fibers that were ready to awaken. She may not have voiced it, but she had given herself fanciful titles in her mind. She-Kiryuuin the White, She-Kiryuuin of Many Colors. And now, She-Kiryuuin the Dead."

Junketsu straightens and stalks toward the ensnared president, stopping only when their faces almost touch and Ryuuko's breath draws heat across pale alabaster. With as much tenderness as one would give a significant other, a hand reaches up, cupping her chin and pressing her thumb against bone to bring her head down to meet her gaze, owner pointedly ignoring the muffled shouts of anger that the other's beloved four devas expressed. The hand trails down, its back brushing against its captive's arm as it does so. Her wakizashi is unceremoniously ripped from bent fingers left uncovered by snaking chains wrapping about her. Her possessed sibling grins impishly as she toys with the bladed end, shifting the hardened black material into various shapes as if it were a simple party trick, running a tongue against the sleek surface.

"Did you know that this very blade, crafted for justice and the strengthening of humanity, was used to bring thousands to their knees?" the kamui whispered harshly, tossing it aside without a spare glance. A broken china doll, the blade clatters to the ground, kicked away with a foot flick. "The *host* approved of its new purpose. You did well in fostering the resentment within her and honing her body."

Senketsu twitched against Satsuki's skin, internally seething. Whether the elder Kiryuuin noticed or not, she did not show, but he knew their hearts were one now more than ever, by the taste of her blood.

"The *poor* child," Junketsu sneered, raised hand drifting uncomfortably close to Satsuki and relishing the glint of steely hate it received. "Abandoned by her own dear father. Seen by others as a mere tool to be used. Stepped and looked down upon all her life. All this vessel searched for for her entire life was a little familial *love*," the kamui spat the last word out derisively, hooking a finger under the elder's chin and bringing it up and force her to meet her

gaze nose-to-nose. “And who better than to give it to her now than her precious *onee-san*, who is here right now, in front of her?”

Junketsu cackles, Ryuuko’s voice high and scratchy under its influence despite the whisper-quiet volume.

“It’s simply *amazing* what a little tweaking of memories can do. Simply make up a few scenarios in which she was treated as less than absolute filth, remind her of the loneliness she felt for all those years as an unloved person, the rejection humanity had for her, and their hatred for her very existence, and she bows to your whims.” it stopped, looking at Satsuki carefully. “All she wanted was to make it stop, to make the hurt. *Go. Away.* As you can imagine, I...” Junketsu paused, throat rasping as a dry, short laugh escaped it. “...obliged her. And now, we are happily united forever. As **one**.”

The human kamui steps back, still grinning.

“I wear her now as I’ve always done. The only difference is that this time, I’m properly wearing her. She is now completely submitting to me and giving me direct control rather than letting me meld with her being and only influence her thoughts and actions... it is...” it sighs, “...wonderful...”

The original god robe pauses again, pensively looking away for the briefest of moments as if to collect her thoughts. “That is not to say she hasn’t completely submitted when I wore her before. Rather, I let her go on about her business, only because it was so convenient for me to not have to waste my time on such trivial matters concerning destroying the human race.”

Ryuuko’s body stops pacing, ember orbs glaring at the Nudists plastered above with an ugly snarl. “Disgusting. Filth brought in my presence. But... we’re wasting time here.” Fingers snapped sharply.

As if on cue, the doors leading to the grand bath burst open, a flood of fibers spilling into the room. Junketsu directs the yellow tsunami’s path with a hand, allowing it to splay itself along the walls and ceiling and wrap itself around the screaming, struggling motley band of would-be heroes. They are pulled from their threaded webbing, the fibrous fire engulfing them whole. Satsuki watches in horror as her friends, rebels, and those she came to know as an adoptive family are swallowed before her dozens at a time. Junketsu itself watches with an air of disinterest, standing at her side as the tide starts to retreat, pulling them towards the stairs and into the lair of the beast itself.

“You will all now become fine nourishment for the life fibers. Consider it an honor,” the kamui slightly turns toward her, eyeing her restrained form with barely-concealed glee as the orange wave abruptly changed direction and drew closer to them. “In fact, the Kiryuuin shall go first, and the *kamui*,” it spat the word distastefully, “shall be no more.”

Limbs pulled taut against the fibers’ hold, her face contorting into a snarl. “Not yet!”

Teeth grit, the heiress strains against her bonds once more, wriggling her arm back and forth. Black saws against orange, keen edges running ragged the woven threads of fate before they snap loudly. The dagger flies through the air, barely being caught by the human god robe’s

fingers or assorted tendrils before it securely lands in her hands. Triumphant, she twists it in her hold, slashing it clear across her legs and bound wrist. Cat-crouched, she lands on the floor, pain from impacting her injured toe quickly fading as canines catch the red glove's pin and Senketsu synchronizes with her, gives her skillful backflips an extra boost as she vaults away from the approaching tide.

CRASH!

A torrent of tangerine threads send shards of stone flying in the air at her feet, Satsuki springing away and pushing off hands in chained somersaults.

WHAP!

She ducks as a corded tendril swipes at her head, the gentlest of breezes kissing her ear as the sharpened edge ghosts across skin and clips a few errant stray hairs along its path, combat rolling as what can be appropriately described as a giant *fist* slams where her feet were precious milliseconds before. Satsuki tumbles, claws springing from interdigital folds to scoop up her prized wakizashi. Quick as a fox, she springs free of the bombardment of darting fibers and clings onto a wall, swinging off a façade's ledge before running along the length of a still-standing column. Jade and concrete crack under red stilettos, owner pushing off to entangle herself within the life fiber mesh, grinning smugly as her subordinates wriggle with excitement, with new found hope as her blade sings out its battle cry.

Shick, shick, shick

The floor shakes as dozens of bodies impact it like the rainfall, each and every one of the goku uniform-clad warriors fiercely revitalized. The stream of combatants increase, Satsuki twisting through the air like a seasoned gymnast and effortlessly slicing through the fibers to free more. And when the last student is untangled, she lets herself fall and land at the head of the mass, her beloved four slamming against the ground and taking up positions beside her. In a matter of seconds, stars and explosions fill the room as uniforms are activated, powered once again with deadly displays of sheer might. Junketsu doesn't look too bothered with the turn of events, however. Instead, it stretches out Ryuuko's arm to the side, the threaded band following about its master shooting faster than the blink of an eye to snatch up the vagrant's dual scissor blades, where they are dropped unceremoniously into her waiting fingers. It twirls them in its host's hands, the blades becoming sleeker with every rotation, thinning out and shortening as their reforging into twin dao blades completed.

The human kamui inhales sharply, letting flames of pure energy appears around its form. Ryuuko's face leers in the moving shadow, gaunt lines exaggerated by crackling blue-tinged white. The glow surrounding her body becomes intense, the subdued azure now dyed with a rainbow gradient as rays of light reach outward. No life fibers form and wrap around her, engulf her to form an exterior covering as her transformation releases, however. Instead, the already present ones brought there by the primordial life fiber burn radiant, fanning out behind her like that of a peacock's tail with sharpened edges pointed towards Nudist enemies. Stars of many colors flare to life and fill the enormous room, their display dwarfed only in magnitude by the god robe's voice as it seeks to deafen, to resound in their very hearts and strike fear into their souls.

“Life Fiber Overdrive! Kamui Ryuuketsu!”

Life Fiber Overdrive!

(衣人至上!)

Kamui Ryuuketsu!

(神威流潔!)

Marble tiling cracks as life fibers burst from the floor, rearing up like snakes. Under a cocked head and her silent command, they dart towards the surprised humans with every intent to spill shared red.

“Scatter!”

They spill in all directions as spearheaded fibers thrust at them, skewering solid steel and shattering it under their might. A band snaps at Satsuki's feet and she is forced to leap away before its lightning quick movements wind around her legs, spirited stride to her possessed sister halted dead in its tracks. Heels solidly clack as she lands, her loyal guards instantly springing to her sides. She nods, fighting with them for the first time truly *as one*. One body. One mind. One spirit, *kiai*ing in unison with one goal in their reach.

“Hmph,” Ryuuketsu hummed, watching humans scatter before her like panicked ants amidst a rainstorm. With a silent gesture, the tendrils fly back to her. Another hand movement returns them outward, letting the fiber tentacles grasp at the columns and wrap around their bases. Plaster and sheetrock fall, wooden beams audibly groaning as her efforts to yank the supports out of place start to bear fruit. “I don't see why the progenitor was so fascinated with letting you live. Then again...” she was cut off as a rumbling groan echoed throughout the aged building, upper levels collapsing and raining chunks of material upon themselves as their supports crumbled. “Kiryuuins' shortsightedness has always been the end of them.”

Satsuki's eyes widen, piercing oxford irises watching the first of the columns fall, barely missing the shocked forms of the screaming two-stars below.

“Get to the walls! Run to safety!”

But it is too late.

Ryuuketsu's mouth opens, and a silent shout shakes the very *air* around them, the aura of its power palpable in the way the room suddenly thrums with energy. A burst of wind with the force of gale winds blows past like speeding dragons, seemingly rooting them to the ground and crushing them downward as even gravity seems to bend at her command. The elite four and their charges choked as yet *another* blinding wave of light encases them for but a brief moment, painfully white and oddly reminiscent of that of the fallen matriarch's in its multicolored fringes. Streaming forth from the hunched-over form of the no-star, it washes over them as a lightning-fast pulse, an outstretched hand extended in their direction seemingly directing its path. They are frozen, unable to move once more as they are forced to remain as they were, rigid and wooden with no amount of straining enough to free themselves. Only Senketsu and Satsuki remain unstunned, the god robe quickly shielding its wearer and barely resisting the almost overwhelming call Absolute Domination issued forth.

More supports join the first, crashing about them and rocking the ground underneath. And soon, the ceiling falls, chunks of stone wider than cars spilling from the ruins above. They are held in place however, eyes widening to saucers as they watch the approaching beams fall, coming ever closer to utterly smothering the life from them.

“NO!”

She shouts, and Senketsu reacts without needing verbal input for the first time, legs morphing into that of their shippu form and darting to her precious four, those that stood by her side for so long.

SNAP!

Her face meets marble as a tendril issuing forth from Ryuuketsu's back quickly snags her lower half, grounding her with a sickening crack. Blades skitter across stonework below. Only her arm is left weakly outstretched, helpless to watch as the lives of her fellows are smothered below her very eyes. And like time slowing to a crawl, she watches the events unfolding before her as if they were played out in slow motion, each rock tumble and dust

fleck captured in painstaking detail, one frame tortuously gliding into place after another. She wants to close her eyes, will it with her iron-forged grit away, but fate won't let her, laughing in her face as it crushes her ambitions underfoot once more.

And in those precious last seconds, she sees the expressions on her elites rapidly change like the seasons - determined, helpless, resigned, accepting. They lock her eyes upon hers, and hers upon them, understanding seeming to flow between them like a stream. And slowly, painfully, their lips twitch upward in a smile for their fearless commander, one last saving grace for her dignity as they are funneled towards death.

THUUM!

Piercing screams assault her ears. Fire and noise fill her senses as the world trembles at its very supports. And when the last of its deafening thunder rolls away, she looks back up to see her subordinates, safe and sound, albeit covered in more than a fine dusting of gray powder. Gazing upward, her view locks on to the smoking barrels of the Naked Sol's cannons, where trails of gray smog issue forth from open ends. Aikuro stands proudly atop his ship, hand on bent knee and a battle rifle slung across his back.

Ryuuketsu notices him and sneers in consternation, directing the living threads to snare him in their grip at once. Fibers seemingly screech as flames engulf them however, withering away within seconds before the all-consuming heat. At her command, the remainder of the roiling mass turns in on itself, bunching up and shooting fetched projectiles towards his vessel instead. Cerulean orbs widen, and he quickly jams a finger against his ear.

“Tsumugu! We need the auto turrets up, **now!**”

Explosions rock the room as the missiles burst midair with tactically placed fire, shredded remains falling uselessly to the ground below. But even as they were ripped asunder, eagle-sharp eyes from all angles caught the last thing any of them expected to see.

Blood.

“W-What?” gasps ring one by one, all eyeing the remains of the hewn projectiles.

Aikuro frowns, raising the scope of his rifle up and peering through the magnified lens. Upon closer examination, he finds amidst the scattered threads traces of organic life - hair, tissue, bone.

People.

Faces mauled and forever etched in ghoulish pained dying screams, their shredded remains streaked the world in red. Fingers were curled, disembodied hands outstretched to a savior that never came.

“Humans...” he gasps, bile churning in his stomach and breath hitching in his throat in shock. “They’re using *humans!*”

“The COVERS,” Satsuki remembers angrily as choked anger rushes to the forefront of her mind, bitterly recalling an unfortunate moment locked within her cage where Ragyou had revealed in sickly sweet tones how the primordial life fiber could be awakened by a mass human sacrifice. And as if that wasn't enough, it had been gorging itself handsomely over the past two months. Her voice lowers to a threatening growl. "Ragyou... Damn you!"

Gleefully grinning at how the grotesque distraction worked so well, Ryuuketsu gestures once more with its paired shout, visibly tiring as yet *another* rainbow wave washes over them. And when it ends, Satsuki's beloved devas are forced to turn towards their leader like puppets on strings, weapons raised and prepped despite their vehement protests. They struggle and strain under Ryuuketsu's power, but it is for naught. The brainwashed hybrid herself joins them not a second later, shoulders heaving subtly with sleek dual blades now configured to appear as matching sabers.

Senketsu sputters. “She isn’t wearing that kamui... that... awful god robe! - and there isn’t a light over us! How can she be using absolute domination!?”

Satsuki echoes his sentiments, quickly crossing her blades over as Ryuuketsu slashes, a screaming arc of scarlet issuing forth in its wake. The force of the blow sends her back a few inches, roiling plumes of dark smoke settling over the battlefield as blue and white meet black and red. She leaps, crossing over to the other side of the bath in the haze of momentary confusion, rolling stiff joints as her generals are made to turn towards her.

“Junketsu was originally made for using absolute domination. This is partly why it was uncontrollable until Lady Satsuki wore it and forced it to cooperate under her will,” Houka explained rapidly, quickly throwing up another hard light clone to evade Senketsu senjin's chainsaw-like blades. “However, the chemical formulation used to temporarily tame Junketsu after battle - all in part because unlike Senketsu, Junketsu seeks to consume its host constantly - weakened the kamui to the point where using it for this purpose was impossible. This is why another kamui had to be made and why Ragyou used Junketsu to brainwash Matoi. Absolute domination would usually require a human sacrifice to be made before it could be used effectively, as seen with Ragyou. However,” he dodged, a darting tendril vanishing from view and reappearing behind Satsuki as the spear-headed cord wove through the multiple fakes and reached toward her. “Junketsu appears to be using Matoi herself as a conduit to bypass the requirement. Kamuis would typically need a source of blood to keep themselves powered, with the stipulation being that the host has a limited supply and therefore a limited amount of time to use it. But - ”

“ - We’re fighting against a kamui that doesn’t need a blood supply,” Uzu finished, gritting his teeth angrily as his arms are forced to thrust his shinai at his leader’s heart. “It *is* one!”

Satsuki’s jaw snaps shut as Gamagoori’s fist pulverizes the handmaidens statue behind her, lips curving in a grimace as his skin almost brushes against hers, reminding herself of the fate she very nearly avoided. Unrelenting waves of pink energy hearts scream as they race through the air towards the heiress, rebounding off a hastily-created shield created at the god robe’s urging. Together, play a deadly game of ping-pong between old friends, sound negations cast one after the other as each sides press to have the other blasted into pieces. A mad idea seized her, as reckless in origin as her very sibling was. Thinking quickly, she deflects the projectiles to her sister when the latter’s attention is busy moving the four around, smirking when it connects. Weaving between attacks of pink and green, blue and yellow, she hooks an arm around the stunned puppeteer herself, dragging her below the water’s surface. For a few tense seconds, they grapple on their sides. Satsuki quickly gains the upper hand, however, soon using her weight to roll her shorter sibling over and pin her back with a knee. Ryuuketsu thrashes harder as the heiress rises, the red heel of Senketsu’s boot soon replacing the joint to mate face with marble. Waves as large as trucks wash over the gathered group with every flail the pinned girl made. And just as her struggling reached a peak, it cut off abruptly, and Ryuuketsu’s body was left to lie still underwater. The Kiryuuin dictator narrowed her eyes, pushing the other’s head against the sodden tiling harder. Nothing.

Gingerly, after what seemed like moments, she eased the pressure and shifted her stance the slightest bit, intending on methodically stabbing through every vital organ. Bakuzan Kouryuu rose, perfectly perpendicular to the hapless prey below. Satsuki moved her foot the the small of her sister’s back...

...And suddenly found herself with threads wrapped tightly around her midsection, impromptu restraints throwing her against quartz walling with force unparalleled by hurricanes to leave a deep impression within the stonework. Swords clink as they are brought against each other to form a long pole-like weapon with an enormous hammer at its end. It rises, its reflection mirrored within deep pools of navy blue.

She rolls, the red weaponhead impacting the ground below and nearly knocking her off her feet with its mere resulting shockwave. Ryuuketsu raises her hand, directing the fibers to instead pummel at the tiling underfoot, boring through the flooring before slashing up to meet expensive stonework again. The ground starts to crack, chunks of it starting to fall away at the edges. Below, what would have been rooms dedicated to extraneous storage have been demolished, giving way to a seemingly endless pit. The four groan as they start to herd their leader towards the growing streak of certain death, struggling and protesting against their uniforms. Escape from the skies was impossible, for Nonon’s barrage of hearts and sharpened golden throwing knives shaped as eighth notes preemptively cut any attempts short. Surrounded by all sides, with threads snaking around her ankles and pulling her in, she tensed, preparing to bitterly fight to the end.

And just when Satsuki’s heels reach the edge, just as her balance was shaken and gravity started to pull her into certain death, something happened.

A whoosh of air breezes by her sibling, paired by the faintest bite of *something* against skin. And suddenly, the tremors stop, and the ever-growing maw threatening to consume them all halts in its tracks. Fiber-spliced muscles freeze, snapping rigidly into place and refusing to move. Garnet orbs widen, silently drifting over to where the curious sensation originated, only to shrink in abject realization once an ever-whizzing mind processed their presence.

Needles.

Three of them, to be exact, sticking out at precise points along her back. And at her feet and racing down her legs, a trail of similarly-shaped projectiles erected along the ground, all leading to...

Tsumugu lowers his dual uzis, sub-machine guns clicking as their magazines run dry. The four crumple, groaning in a menagerie of voiced discomfort as various aches and pains race through their bodies. Their tailored regalias seize, control quickly transferring back over to their wearers proper.

Satsuki allows herself to fall, Senketsu responding to her innate thoughts by transforming her legs into thrusters and breaking free from the ensnaring vine. Heels firmly snap against terra firma, owner grinning smugly as odds were swung back in her favor once more even as yellow threads yanked said needles out of place and allowed their master to move freely once more. Partners in arms standing to fight against the world's last great threat they stand, a rainbow of colors and hues and noise facing off a wall of all-consuming white.

“Sanageyama, take her left flank. Gamagoori, right flank. Inumuta, throw up clones as distractions- the more, the better. One-stars go with Sanageyama, and two-stars with Gamagoori. Jakuzure, you're with me. We're charging from the front, you're going to use the air to your tactical advantage. It can only focus at one direction at once; use her blind spots to your advantage,”

Their unified shout rocks the heavens. “Yes, Lady Satsuki!”

The most disturbing thing about the situation - no, about Junketsu - was how absolutely silent it was. Besides the monologuing in the beginning, no words were uttered, no hisses made in striking. No huffing puffs of air, or gasps of exertion. She was even sure that Ryuuko's body didn't even need to *breathe*. In fact, she swore quietly as only the tiniest flash of red to her side warned her of an incoming strike- barely managing to parry it away before her foe disappeared into the darkness like foxes into the night, it was only thanks to her training and the formerly blind swordsman's uncanny senses that didn't put them at an incredible disadvantage.

Tsing!

“Gamagoori, to your right!” she roared, the giant responding with well-practiced precision by whirling around and slamming his gauntlets against her sneaking blade. What he failed to foresee, however, was the other one darting around his side.

SHLICK.

“Gah-!”

A gurgled cry of surprise.

He looked down.

Red welled up from the center of his abdomen, a sliver of orange slowly pushing through and happily gorging from the well of spilt life-essence.

“Oops,” Ryuuketsu mockingly snickered, directing the fiber-spears to raise his limp body up to her line of sight. “Looks like I missed his heart. No quick and painless death for him, after all. What a shame...” Another vine snaps through hardened flesh, then another, letting blood coat each and every one of the appendages. It is then flung away, 7-plus foot tall frame rolling over slickened tile to lie facedown in a gathering pool of water. “If it’s any consolation, he *did* buy you all a few extra seconds of life with his own, meaningless, one.”

“You... monster...” Satsuki hisses, swiping at her neck as the rest of the devas stare on in horror.

“S-Senpai!” Mako sputtered, scurrying over to his unmoving form, trembling from what *should* have been certain death stares her in the face once more.

“Are you safe, Mankanshoku?” he groans, willing himself to look at his charge with one eye open. She nods hesitantly, taking one of his massive hands in hers. “Good. Then I have... performed my duties...”

Life fleeing his body, his head impacts the ground with one final sigh, muscles relaxing for the last time as breath is drawn from from his unmoving form.

Nonon is grabbed in that moment of distraction, life fibers winding around her throat and squeezing tight. Deathly pale white sweeps across her skin as gagging and coughing do little to better his situation, face reddening as her blood *pulses*, pushes against the garotte's overwhelming strength to bring life.

Uzu turns. "No!"

A thunderous crack brings her level with the floor once more before any of them could move, gasping for breath. Stepping protectively in front of her wheezing form and making a mental note to thank the mohawked Nudist sniper later, Sanageyama stares at the kamui-monster, shinai drawn, keen forest locked onto cunning ember. Her stride is that of an accomplished predator- body low and steps carefully measured. Flawless, graceful, menacing. She reminds him of a lioness of sorts, crawling through the savannah and stalking her prey though long blades of grass. They circle each other slowly, cautiously taking the time to sweep their gazes along the other's body, claws and fangs and blades glinting maliciously in what little light there is to be had. Unlike the previous times they had fought, there is no sense of eager anticipation filling his bones; instead, it is one of dread, knowing that it is either life or death. He strikes like a cobra, darting forward in the blink of an eye.

Ryuuketsu snaps her blade to the side. Sparks hiss and fly from where their weapons connect. A well-oiled machine, she moves, one relentless swing traded for another with military precision. She advances and he retreats.

SLASH

Stunned, a hand is brought to the sharpened edges, fingers brushing against the sawed-off point in amazement as Ryuuketsu wipes a miniscule amount of blood off her face and casually laps at it. He didn't even see the strike coming, not even with all his senses boosted. No longer obstructed by his visor, he leaps to the side, only to have the fiber-whip snap at him again, cutting clean through the bulky armor's leg and slice up through his chest plates. He curses, pushing the failing uniform to its limit as steam billows and mechanisms protest audibly with every movement. A heated vibration running along its length warns him of the precious seconds he had left before the inevitable happened.

At the last moment, he bails, letting the wrecked goku uniform come within a hair's breadth of the absolutely bored god robe before bursting out of its chest, leaving her engulfed in a stunning series of flame spigots and detonations. Dark plumes of smoke rise, but a standing figure yet remains, untroubled by the roaring whirlwind of hellfire that had just been dropped on it.

He scoffs. Of course.

But then he sees it in the midst of the roaring flames, the confident strut posed and the swords at her side.

His leader, waiting in the wings.

An opening.

Faking an unassuming expression, he intentionally leaves his back exposed, ears pricked and primed to listen for the ghostly *whoosh* that accompanied her every movement. He waited, feeling the very molecules of the space surrounding him shift the slightest bit. The scent of blood fills his nose.

There!

CLACK

A strangled cry, bamboo against flesh. And soon after, a solid sixty kilograms of muscle that wrenched her arm behind her back, pinning her nude form in place.

On Satsuki's side, she deliberated, watching as her loyal elite did battle with her sister. Her mind flashed thousands of possibilities, the detail of Ryuuketsu's attention being severely limited to one combatant at a time taking precedence above all, very much like how it was with the original Junketsu-Ryuuko pair. Sneak up and hold her down? See if Junketsu could be delayed until a more suitable method of dealing with her arises? Perhaps...

But *how*?

Eyes dart, roving over the absolutely chaotic scene before them. Use the ship? Risky, but would work only for a few seconds, with a large danger posed if Junketsu thought to use the vessel as a weapon herself as a bludgeon. Perhaps a more personal approach would work, pin her down perhaps, and work from there...

...But with what?

...

White glimmers flashed in the corner of her eye, dully reflecting in the little light. She starts, excited.

Of course! Ragyou's blades! They were the only object to be left behind after Ryuuko absorbed Shinra Kouketsu with that *monster* inside it, after all!

A furtive search through the mounds of detrius rewards her questing gaze with the prized objects. Buried under the mess and heavily chipped in more places than can be counted on one's hands, yes, but they are no worse for wear considering the circumstances.

She smirks.

Ryuuketsu looks shocked as the Senketsu-Satsuki pair suddenly appear before her just as her leg sweeps his and she manages to grab hold of the swordsman, knocking twin thrusting blades away with a military-precise strike. The streak of black and red whirls upon itself like a tornado, whipping edged tips of ebony and scarlet forcing her to continuously leap back, preventing her from drawing closer. Scarlet sweeps, clipping her bangs the slightest bit. Startled, she looks up, attention perfectly diverted as a crimson heel juts out and squarely lands against her stomach, parting her feet with the ground and slamming her head against the wall. A sickening crack fills the air as thin bone shatters as it meets concrete.

She rises slowly, head reeling and vision spinning, a hand lamely reaching out to grasp the accented wall for support.

And then, a flash of white, a blur that jets by her so fast that even her enhanced perceptions have trouble capturing its movements.

“Augh!”

Fresh shrieks of agony accompany globulets of blood pouring from a pierced palm, the human god robe’s terrified pupils twitching within a great expanse of white as its overthrown master’s weapon pin its host’s limb to the wall proper behind her. And just as she summoned the focus to snap out of her mental haze and pry the ensnared limb loose from its setting, the President herself slides in. Scarlet clashes against white, the former ruler of Honnouji expertly deflecting the swinging dao blade with a mere flick of her wrist. Her knee raises and harshly slams against the falling limb, knocking the blade out of an iron grip. Ryuuketsu snarls, ragged breaths immediately giving way to anguished cries as Satsuki deftly pierced the other hand to the wall with stolen weapon’s twin.

Pretenses of arrogant calm abandoned, the human kamui squirms in her bindings like a trapped beast, unconcerned in the treacherous panicked haze as flesh and bone were ripped out of place in her struggles. Her hair-raising cries become less human and more animalistic in nature, growing shrill and eerie, making all who heard it suddenly become afflicted with shivers running along the length of their spines. And above her deafening screams, Senketsu’s pleading voice called to his former wearer over and over again like a broken record, “Ryuuko! Snap out of it! Snap out of it, Ryuuko!”

And for a moment, it seems to work. Terrified red meets its equal hue, her face twisting to match a lonely girl adrift in an unfamiliar place and unfamiliar people. But then it is replaced with insurmountable rage, and she rears up her lower half, curling it in upon herself before thrusting it outward, letting it connect against Satsuki’s bones with a sickening crack. She skids, sliding across the wettened battlefield before grinding to a halt on her side.

“Reaaaaghhh!”

Granite crumbles as snow white points are ripped free from its anchor, red arcs splattering free across its face as the unbound god robe tears the surrounding wall out with her. Slowly, *painfully*, she closes her hands, hardened twin weapons shattering under her might and pointed ends slipping free of the bored wound, faintly tinkling against precious stones.

Fiber trails issuing forth from fresh wounds in Ryuuketsu's back snake towards her troublesome backstabbing sibling, latching onto her face. Razor-sharp threads pierce her skin then, wriggling under and feeding on the plentiful pool of blood that lay beneath as they tore wide swaths through the other's body before skewering out the other end and pinning it to the ground below. Delirious sensations of lightheadedness besieged her, followed suit by a very *real* feeling of what can only be properly be described as fangs sinking deep into her carotids. She groans, the edges of her vision growing black and less focused. Ryuuketsu, meanwhile, is beside herself with rapt exuberance, feeling the much-desired strength the elder Kiryuuin possessed flow into her body with every passing second. She leans further into the touch, relishing the distinctly unique warm coppery tang that only blood seemed to possess.

A booming laugh suddenly cuts her off, and she tries to jerk her head upward to face this new challenger, only for her head knocked aside by a torrent of spiked whips. *Gamagoori* falls from the towering heavens above, arms outstretched and miraculously *alive* despite the thorough stabbing he took. She hisses at this new onslaught, shielding her face with an arm and releasing her prey from her grip.

"S-Senpai!" Mako cries, eyes aglitter with unshed tears of happiness. "You're alive!"

"That I am, Mankanshouku!" he bellowed.

The brunette sniffles. "H-How-!?"

"A specially formed metal plate," he boasted. "My family's ironworks had it specially made in case the worst would happen!"

"Don't try to play it cool!" Jakuzure snaps, hovering from above. "We all saw you faint!"

"It was most disgraceful!" he agreed, landing before the Kiryuuin siblings with a thundering smash. "But I intend on rectifying that problem, starting now!"

Thousands of whips seemingly stream from his back to connect with their target. Weakly, Ryuuketsu cries out, body flying away as it is assaulted from all angles.

"Don't forget about us nudists! We're not down and out yet! All our work will be for naught -" Aikuro shouts as he erupts from the sidelines, DTR melding with Tsumugu's own.

"- if we don't bare out nudist souls - !" the mohawked man completed, matching the stripper's determined expression with his furious own.

"- with our double! **Naked! DTR!**" they both shouted, pushing off the perilous ledge to engage their target below.

Their leap is contested by the mistress of life fibers herself, their fused robot slamming against her body before being tossed in the air by one of the roaming tendrils. Arcing back, they re-engage, dropping the robot on top of her and letting it detonate with a resounding chained series of blasts. The hybrid merely looks at it before throwing up a hand, letting a the vines sprouting from her body take the damage for her.

“Pathetic,” Ryuuketsu whispers, swiping the ruined remains of the mech with one sweep of her extra limbs before leaping back into the fray.

An elbow dug into the ground, spurts of power feeding strength back into her exhausted muscles. Weakly, Satsuki forced her head up, form shaking greatly under the strain. Like the gathering dewfall, thoughts come slowly to her mind, arriving in disjointed fragments that form coherent thoughts much too slowly for her liking. Her head slowly swivels, taking in the sights and sounds of her combatants-in-arms, how they struggle against the only foe, the impossible foe, the unstoppable foe.

‘They... won’t survive Junketsu, not when it’s like this...’

A cold sweat breaks over her brow, breath turning harsh and ragged.

‘They’ll die because of me,’ she screams in her mind, watching as Ryuuketsu casually blocks Omiko’s thousand-ball serve with but a hand, the two-star screaming three octaves higher as fibers snaked around her weapon.

Unable to let go as she was raised high into the air, she could only hold on as the fiber tendrils jerked and sent her body smashing against the broken remains of ceiling beams repeatedly. Fukuroda tries a right handed jab, confident-yet-aggressive smirk instantly shifting to an utterly dismayed one as his prized boxing glove is shattered upon striking Ryuuketsu’s bare skin. The biology club bombards her with an unrelenting stream of scalpels, but very much like when she had donned Senketsu, they bounce harmlessly off her skin, bending at obtuse angles along the way before falling to the side. The gardening club furiously cultivates monstrous vines to snare her so that the various martial arts clubs can strike, but they are merely snapped and their comrades sent flying.

An ebony sliver is driven into the ground. On wobbly feet and held up by her sword, she rises despite Senketsu’s warnings against sudden movements, calling to her subordinates.

“Retreat!” she shouts, her thunderous voice carrying over the din of battle and reaching all corners of the building. “Fall back after me!”

The distressed wail of Mankanshoku catches her attention, and she turns to face her, blades retrieved and wearily raised once more. The thundering crash of her faithful living shield, however, sends her skidding to a halt, and she looks up gracefully as he dwarves far past her height, brimming with confidence and the angel-song of a concerted adrenaline rush.

“We’ve got her, Lady Satsuki!” he rumbles, “Go and regroup with the others!”

And so she flees like a coward with her tail between her legs.

'No!' she chides herself, heels slapping against tile as she follows the moving mass of human bodies. *'Tactical retreats are never defeats!'*

She stops her company, led by her students to an empty room with a gaping hole in a wall. The cool outside air drifts in, tantalizing exhausted bodies and minds with its mere presence. Heart thumping harshly in her chest, enamel grinds against each other as her, jaw clenching with tremendous force.

'It's impossible to win against Junketsu. Our resources are strained as it is and it seemingly has no limit to its abilities. We get tired, we get worn down - it still stands because it doesn't need to fight against the life fibers any longer for more power! We can't do anything that will hold it off long enough to gain the upper hand...'

"Unless..." she paused, eyes widening the slightest bit as she recalled exactly how Ryuuko and Senketsu got so infuriatingly strong in the first place, besides using their unparalleled bondage. "Senketsu!" the eye responds by instantly flitting to her. "We need to absorb the banshis of the other uniforms. Can you do that?"

"I am unsure if it will work," Senketsu nervously states. "I... I've never done this before, at least, not without stripping them physically from their uniforms with Ryuuko's blade. Ripping it directly from their woven work should take significantly more effort..."

"We have no other choice," she counters, freezing as a sickly sweet voice calls to her.

"Satsuukiiiiiii~..." Ryuuketsu croons, joyful ethereal cries sounding as if she were right. Behind. Her. "Where aaaaarreee yoooouu~!"

"I... I'll try, then" he sighs defeated as the students loyally take their positions around their council president, bunching around her that much tighter.

She breathes in. Out. Blanking her mind with a single practiced thought.

Orange seeps into the room, practically mocking their attempts at resistance and threatening to overtake them all. The imminent danger is pushed aside, for there are more pressing matters at hand. White flames crackle into existence around her as the kamui reaches out with his power, drawing the banshi threads that held the uniforms together like honey to flies. Twin eyes of deep cobalt blue snap open as their aura grows, her voice ringing out in the decrepit room.

"Allow me to wear all of your uniforms!"

Stars white as bone twinkle in the darkened annex as dozens of uniforms are stripped off their owners at once, all participants steadfastly maintaining their pose with arms outstretched even as a vacuum was formed right where their leader stood, tornado-strength gales whipping around them. They slam into the elder Kiryuuin viciously, disappearing into the black kamui upon the merest touch. Satsuki tolerates the onslaught with grit teeth and bent knees, beads of sweat forming at her browline as the weight of the god robe suddenly swings wildly out of balance, straining her body to levels that even Junketsu never impressed upon her. The hurricane billowing about her picked up, and the crackling energy that surrounded her

intensified greatly, pure white spilling into rooms adjacent and lighting up the manor proper. And then, a huge surge of adrenaline rushed through her veins, bringing wearied muscles to life and reinvigorating her unbreakable spirit. Vaguely, she felt Senketsu shift about her, momentarily unwinding before snapping back into place, becoming sleeker, more streamlined. And as soon as the knotted weight fully impresses itself upon her, it flees her presence like a spectral ghost, leaving behind a curiously light feeling that empowers, that makes her feel as if everything was within her grasp and that she had the power to do everything. She blinks her eyes open as the last of the rush drains from her, finding not one, but two eyes staring back at her from her chest. His crests now flow outward and stretch far past her shoulders, becoming more prominent than ever before. Reaching up, she finds that the horns accentuating her hair have grown larger as well, sharpened to points and slicked back. Her body glows in the aftermath, hope as well as new-found strength coursing through every fiber of her body.

“Listen up!” she shouts, swinging her wakizashi out to point to the waiting Nudist forces. “Evacuate to the shores if possible. We are facing an impossible enemy, and I will not tolerate any further loss of life. The outside perimeter has been cleared of all COVERS within a fifteen kilometer radius. You will go with them and evacuate to a safe distance away. Is that understood!?”

The familiar snap of bodies as they straightened to salute her sharply cracked through the crumbling room like a whip. “Yes Lady Satsuki!”

“Proceed!”

A wave of pale and tan bodies abandoned her in a great wave, flanked by the guerrilla forces out the wall opening as all fled from the oncoming rush of orange that threatened to ensnare, to drag them to their deaths. Bakuzan halves sang, and with their metallic musics came the steady *snip, snip, snip* of shearing fibers. Muscles flexed, legs preparing to carry her forward to meet her idiot of a sibling head-on and end this madness.

“Lady Satsuki, wait”

She straightens and turns to face the blue-haired Nudist, his normally exuberant face uncharacteristically drawn and completely devoid of any banter. Before she can speak, he sprints towards her and presses something into her palms, something cold and metal. Satsuki eyes the payload, eyes gaining the slightest bit of bitter hardness when she realizes what it is.

It’s the gun Ryuuko gave her in days past.

Mikisugi looks at her knowingly, eyes softened and colored with understanding. He knows very well the pain loss brought to him by stealing away the life of his beloved betrothed and the irony in how he now was asking another to do the same with a long-lost sibling. Her mouth is cottony, bone-dry like the hottest deserts. Her jaw works, teeth clenching and grinding as gears turn in her head.

She somehow manages the will to speak up, the barest of a grave frown toying at the corner of her lips. “Mikisugi-san, I-

He bows deeply.

“I apologize for being so forward, Lady Satsuki, but you are the only one that can get close enough to her and survive direct combat in the state we are in now. The magazine’s full of life fiber-coated bullets. We figured that having them tipped wasn’t enough to kill Ragyou, so we thought that covering them with hardened life fibers in addition to capping them to slow her regeneration would work.” He exhaled heavily, mouth pulling low. “Who’d have known that we were going to use it on Ryuuko-kun instead... ..There’s only enough to make a single magazine, so please, aim carefully. There should be twelve bullets, but I can give you regular ones to delay her if necessary.”

Lithe fingers sweep over the gun’s sides, a steely grimace now plain on her face. She wants to say the words “I can’t”, to somehow convince herself that they needn’t resort to such methods, not when there were other methods to snapping Ryuuko out of the mad god robe’s embrace. But she knows that if she puts her feelings before her and blinds herself with them once more as she had done before in the Grand Festival, humanity would surely perish. So she takes it, tucking the weapon on the flexible red cloth band that holds Senketsu’s skirt. The kamui’s suspenders pull taut around it as the skin that touches the gun recoils and draws away from its cold unfeeling touch as if it were fully conscious of its intended purpose.

“The twelve shall be sufficient.”

Aikuro nods crisply and leaves, sparing her only a brief explanation on how to use the weapon before fleeing, presumably to regroup with the rest of the nudists and escort them out safely.

“Senketsu,” she says sharply, the startled kamui seizing around her for the briefest of moments as a gloved finger lightly brushes against the polished metal barrel. “Are you willing to aid in killing Ryuuko, if necessary?”

There was a short pause, a rather heavy one at that as the god robe considered the implications.

“I... trust you would find another way before resorting to such tactics.”

The dictator nods, satisfied. A good answer as it could be given the kamui’s rather polarizing nature from the white god robe’s own. She speeds off towards the white blip her sibling represented, relishing in their newly bonded power. Senketsu speaks suddenly, voice tinged with trepidation.

“What if I were to loosen Junketsu’s hold on Ryuuko?”

“Shaking loose Junketsu’s fibers from Ryuuko’s own is no longer an option. If anything, it is an impossibility, now that they’ve fully fused. We need to find an alternate way.”

“...What if I were to synchronize with her?”

She brushes off the question without hesitation. “It would either result in her momentarily regaining her senses before succumbing back to Junketsu’s hold, or boost their abilities to the

point where nobody can stop them.”

A strange feeling ran up her arm then, blossoming at her fingertips and racing to the shoulder bone. Sharp blue shot to red for an explanation.

“When I synchronize with Ryuuko, with you, I connect with them on a level far past the surface. I can refuse to cooperate as I have done with Maiko, to freeze their limbs completely or desynchronize so prevent my use. Absolute Domination can’t quite affect me, so I am not susceptible to be controlled by her will.”

Satsuki pursed her lips, eventually nodding.

“First priority is getting her to come after us. Nobody else can withstand the power of a fully awakened god robe. In the meantime, we need to find a way to distract them before letting you synchronize with her.”

Multicolored irises slowly draw towards the ruined ceiling, Satsuki skids to a stop momentarily, looking on with the faintest hint of confusion before following his gaze.

“Ah,” she breathes, eyeing the Nudist ship ever-so slightly balancing over the edge of the ruined flooring above, gears turning rapidly in her mind and a calculating smile growing on her face.

The red scissor sword of fate is hefted overhead, Ryuuketsu easily pinning the Fight Club President underwater with a bare foot as she squirms beneath her. The massive bronze knuckles fly, devastating punches slamming against her ankles doing no more damage as a slew of crumpled papers would. A large cage of life fibers surrounded the two of them, effectively shielding the human kamui from any of the Elite Four’s attacks. She chuckled darkly, adding more weight to the ball of her foot and deviously grinning as the underachiever’s ribs made a satisfying groaning sound, the shorter girl gasping for air as the bony prison closed around delicate organs. Satsuki cursed under her breath and accelerates just as the younger’s rapid flailing grew less intense and frequent, the bubbles issuing forth from her mouth lessening with every passing second. Footsteps flightier than a bird’s wings clacked against the ground, water kicking up and shooting high into the sky in their wake. Her own lungs burn with exertion, the mere act of breathing grating against delicate tissue and setting her chest aflame.

Faster! Faster!

Mako’s eyes began to close now, her wild swings and pawing grasps missing their target completely, arms unknowingly drawing closer to her core as the fire of life sputtered within her and started to die out. She could see it now, the distance between her and her destination was much too large to be covered for anything to be effective.

Anything, except...

Unthinking, Satsuki whipped the pistol out from Senketsu's suspenders, flicking the safety off and not bothering to aim it properly. All she could think about - all she saw as the red swords swung down and prepared to cleave the trapped girl in half - was Ryuuko and Mako. The gun barked once, and Ryuuketsu's head immediately snapped towards her, her grin never losing its intensity. Of course, the bullet never connected, instead harmlessly flying off to the side, but it had done its job well. The scissor swords had paused their descent, and their owner's crushing weight momentarily lessened, the no-star's head jerking above the water level to breathe deep, shuddering breaths.

"Satsuki..." Ryuuketsu whispered gleefully, easing pressure completely off the no-star and allowing the sputtering girl to recover for the briefest of moments; a column of fibers soon takes her place and resume pinning the coconut-haired girl.

The cage collapses about her as she steps to meet her sibling, stride uninterrupted by the barrage of missiles, whips, and shinai strikes sent her way.

"Lady Satsuki!" she hears them shout, first through the room and later through the cracked receiver mounted in her ear a split-second later. "You haven't evacuated!"

"I have a plan," she coolly counters, noting with satisfaction that Ryuuko was missing her ear bead and thusly ignorant. "I need you to move into position while I distract her. Senketsu, are you ready?"

Grunt of assent given, Satsuki pushes off, her loyal followers following in-step at her tail as she explains the finer details of her scheme, guides them with a welcoming confidence with every step they took.

"Houka, now!"

She leaps away as Ryuuketsu intercepts her first thrust and strikes out, a low poly clone erupting from nothingness to take the hit in her stead. Red slams into blue, blade slickly shattering the hard light projection so thoughtfully provided by Honnouji's hacker. Digital shards rain down like broken glass, wire framing rapidly flickering in between existences before it too collapsed. Frustrated, she bolts after her retreating form, only to get smacked in the cheek and flung aside by a swinging sword. A devastating punch from above forces her into a massive fissure bisecting the ground right afterward, steel-clad knuckles forcefully impacting flesh against stone. She rises, hands pushing off the massive fist that dwarfed her greatly in comparison, only to be crushed into fractured earth once more as sickeningly bright pink showers of hearts slammed against her naked form.

"Did you forget about me?" Nonon calls from above. "Don't forget that there are four of us!"

"Move aside," the hybrid whispers angrily.

Vines sprouting from along her back slam into them, widening the gap far enough to clear her path to her *darling* sister. They race side by side, looping through the flaming ruins of the mansion's upper stories like interloping deer under forest cover. More of the building gives

way with each passing second, the flames from Tsumugu's primary onslaught feeding on the plethora of fuel provided by countless books and tapestries of old, painting the spotless white of the aging building with the same hellish hues the alien threads themselves possessed. Acrid fumes burn at their throats, watering eyes and blinding all.

But that was precisely what Satsuki wanted.

She strikes, newfound strength causing the other to slam clear through a dozen walls before being knocked outside. Snarling, she emerges from above, recklessly crashing through plaster with fangs bared and fingers outstretched, ready to spear them through her flesh and tear her out from the inside. But she is stronger than when Ryuuko had last fought her, swifter and more agile when the banshis of hundreds that fought beside her thrum within Senketsu's very fibers. And more than once does Ryuuketsu find herself on the receiving ends of blows before she can even *see* Satsuki move, the elder seeming to teleport behind her in the most unfortunate moments. She cries, a drill ramming clean through her body before retreating, kamui-borne blades tearing into her flesh not a second later. Satsuki pretends to flee, and Ryuuketsu pursues, thoughts on torturing the former's subordinates to draw her out forgotten and strength wasted on attempting to eliminate the persistent thorn in her side.

Their chase ends above the battlefield, with the hybrid disappearing amongst the charring wood and smoky flames. Seeking to escape and regroup, Satsuki lowers herself towards the rest of her devas, a room crashing into nothingness disguising the sound of a very familiar person sneaking up behind her. A surprise drop kick sends her back down into the baths below, skull sickly cracking upon impact with hardened stone. Red stars briefly envelop her form, their transformation winking out pitifully as what little blood there was to be spared was drained. A small hand grasps the deactivated god robe, fisting the material. Ryuuketsu sneers.

“Die.”

Senketsu is torn from Satsuki's body in a single abrupt motion, his shreds pitifully falling to the ground below. The gun clatters uselessly to the side, and Ryuuketsu glares at it as she lifts a heel up, prepared to crush it with a single devastating blow. But fate isn't on her side, however, and a series of missiles blasts her far away from her favored targets, letting her skid right to the stop next to the twisted metal wreck of the fallen vessel in a half-crouch, twin trails of upturned debris marking heels and clawed fingers digging into ground.

She grins cockily, slowly straightening up and fixing the diminutive assailant with a sneer. “You think that'll have an effect on me?”

“Nope,” Inumuta smugly declares, swiftly catching her attention. Solely focused on the big red button the Nudist flagship possessed, he got no small sick sense of satisfaction when he saw her eyes widen in shock. “But it did put you in my firing range.”

With that, the mounted turrets opened fire upon her, peppering her with bullets and missiles and a thousand other projectiles she can barely see. The remaining ceiling collapses, burying her underneath the detritus, steel I-beams and traditional wooden supports crushing her. She erupts from the small debris mountain in an explosive burst unlike that of an awakening volcano, practically radiating with incensed power. Scarlet red aura crackles at her fingertips, which have lengthened into talons fit for rending the flesh off rightfully-caught prey. Her horns have extended too, made for skewering flesh anew. Sleek points have broken out along her spine, dripping with fresh blood as thick ivory plates emerge as well to hold them steady. Baying for blood, she charges the nearest deva she can find.

A shadow framed by light distracts her, however, and she whips her head towards the source. The human god robe shields its host's face with a raised arm and glares at her former kamui as he looms overhead, seemingly dwarfing her many times over as he leaps towards her. Red eyes narrow as she sees movement behind the attacking god robe; a very-much recovered Mako's arms are extended towards the two of them, no doubt having more than a helping hand in the kamui's survival.

"I'm going to put you on, and make you come to your senses!"

Ryuuketsu growls and readies her blades, hefting the red swords of fate and preparing to cleave this nuisance into unrecognizable pieces once and for all. But her efforts are for naught, for from behind, arms wrap themselves around hers, pinioning them to her side and causing her favored weapons to fall uselessly to the watery ground below. Gamagoori shouts deafeningly as his titanic strength does battle with Satsuki's rival, muscles straining painfully as the lithe girl pushes back- hard- the small sliver of space between her elbows and midsection growing larger with every passing second.

Cat-stance back. Hip strike. Shoulder wriggle to destabilize his grip. Elbow strike to the kidney. A splintering crack as the remainder of the hardened metal plate shielding his gut is shattered into useless iron shards.

With a roar, she breaks free of his weakened hold and flings him over her shoulder by his uniform, reclaiming her swords and brandishing them angrily. But a low roar catches her attention and, startled, she watches as the green-haired deva rushes her, his every footfall coming in as if played in slow motion. Ryuuketsu snarls, waist twisting out of true as her hand moves to crush the elite's life from his body.

Too late.

Her legs are jackknifed out from under her with one swipe of the bamboo sword, painfully slamming against ruined tiling. She is knocked back as Sanageyama comes in for a series of low blows rather than the kick she predicted, arm block flying uselessly to the side and the air forced from her lungs when his pommel lands square on her sternum. And just as soon as her stumbles cease and her footing regained, a darting hand snatches her wrist, hurtling over its owner's shoulders and slamming her back against the ground. Those same hands wrap

themselves around her now, the red glove of fate forced onto her hand and the uniform halves slipped onto her thrashing body. Satsuki pins her against the tiling with her knee to a chest, Uzu's other hand coming up to slide the seki tekko's pin along its track and finally rip it free.

Ryuuketsu screams as Senketsu synchronizes with her, the kamui following a second later as pure white-hot agony stabs both of them to the core. It's a burning feeling peppered with excruciating amounts of pain, as if they both were being disassembled one thread at a time and set ablaze, or had acid directly poured onto their fibers. Together, they knock the dictator aside and fall into the bath below, squirming and rolling over repeatedly within acrid waters in suffered torture. Generous clouds of steam billow forth from broken skin and exhaust ports, easily heating the room by a few degrees.

It's too much!

Boiling blood appears at the scarlet fringes of his transformed being, hissing and bubbling away as the very ichor of the *thing* that he covered sought to burn, to wear away at his body as if it were acid.

But despite this, he tries. He perseveres. He is but a man amongst a giant, but his weapon is the banshis of hundreds that protected Satsuki, hundreds that devoted her lives to her and would willingly lay them down for her cause. And because of this new resistance, he pushes back, tearing through the over-encompassing noise that surrounded him. If it were him on his own, he surely would have been ripped away quite instantly, but they wrap around him like a loving embrace and shield him, shield his fragile core against the relentless onslaught. And so he slashes through the over-encompassing nothingness, feeling himself die a thousand times and a thousand times more with each second spent calling after his old wearer.

"Ryuuko," he groans, the last vowels of her name turning from wearied cry to a keening moan. "Ryuuuuukooooo..."

Senketsu tries to connect back to his old wearer, his Ryuuko. His fibers wrap tightly around the girl's skin as she writhes continuously in shared pain, digging deeply and winding through the tiny hole the glove's pin created, trying to link to her once more. His threads touch upon her corrupted own, fighting against her body as it seems to reject him completely.

At first, there was nothing there. No matter how tightly Senketsu wove and curled around her body or snarled his fabric with her own fibers, his being didn't seem to penetrate the blinding light within. Simply put, there was no sign of her anywhere. He soon found himself fruitlessly reaching out to all corners of her self, looking for any bit of Ryuuko- no matter how fragmented and grossly mutilated it was- to seize from the blighted depths with the grip of a thousand titans and bring back to the surface with him. It was blinding. It was cold and warm and electrifying at the same time. And for a few, heart-wrenching moments, he flailed within the confounding emptiness with nothing to show.

And then, he sensed it.

A crack in the veil, a sliver of black against the white, a stirring dark speck so resilient and stubborn as its owner clashing against that which enveloped it, turning it an impossible shade of red upon collision- a singular scarlet star's flickering glint. It was faint, but contrasted against a vacuum, it might as well have been set aglow by a thousand other stars. Set near the fiber infused organ, *his Ryuuko* cried for him, calling back with shouts muffled by the suffocating presence of the snow-colored kamui. Simply put, it was amazing that the purest form of his wearer- his pair-bond whose very soul was woven with his fibers to give him life- existed next to that which gave her so much pain. The heart, a dual symbol of life and death, the very thing he craved more so than her blood after hearing it for the first time, was an alight beacon, hailing him home. Life, for it pumped blood, and death, as it was fused to alien existence that brought nothing but suffering and destruction, its rhythmic song was the sweetest music to his ears.

For Senketsu, it was more than enough.

He drew closer to that speck of life, invited by the way it pulsed and throbbed visibly in response to his very presence. The buffering offensive the pure god robe provided proved no match for his determination, his sheer will born from partial inheritance of the Kiryuuin line through his destined wearer. His threads wove through thick tissues and skin, snaking through veins and firmly wrapping around it- a hand snatching up a friend's matching pair in a gesture of solidarity, of mutual willingness to endure all that life threw in their way. And finally did Ryuuko respond to his efforts with what little autonomous strength her battered spirit could muster, spliced threads reaching back and curling around his to tie their bond taut. Then she was coursing through his consciousness through their newly-forged link to touch his soul with hers, only able to express her unbounded joy in short bursts of electrical activity provided by alighted nerves. Senketsu didn't even have to say anything once they seemed to meld with one another once more; like everything else regarding their beings, it was purely instinctive, as natural as the rising and falling of the waves and the rotation of Earth about its axis. Senketsu wanted his wearer, and Ryuuko wanted her god robe.

The first "Sen... ket... su..." her mouth vocally breathed of its own volition was the most beautiful thing that the dark-colored god robe ever heard, as was the orchestral symphony of various renditions of his name that followed suit.

Weak scarlet stars became painfully bright. Feeding off his energy, it grew, black cracks spreading throughout the world of white, spiderwebs appearing on shattering glass as the illusion started to buckle, started to collapse under their combined influence.

And for a second, it works.

Warmth fills his fibers as her blood freely streams through it, body disintegrating in ember-tipped particles and reforming around her naked one with a resounding snap. A fully synchronized uniform replaced the transformation resembling their first, shoddily-constructed one, the farce of true power they displayed when they first met. Wing crests freely flowed over her shoulders, pleated skirt halves issued forth from tightening suspenders, and fabric rolled over bleeding skin that feeds, that strengthens him. Invigorated, he reaches out once more, and is pleased when he finds an invisible presence reaching back to answer his call, thrumming to his sound and he to her sound. And he does more than *feel* her; for the moment she truly synchronizes with his being and him to her being, he *is* her, sharing in the overwhelming joy she exhibited.

But the kamui possessing Ryuuko doesn't take too kindly at his intervention and bites back-hard. Shared bondage is taken advantage of, and it crawls along branching paths, god-like fury striking its host as much as it does with its competitor. The desync is instantaneous-Senketsu is ungracefully ripped off of his former wearer in a tremendous burst of force and sound as the unadulterated pain of a thousand trucks slamming against her weakening body shoots through both of them. For the second time that day, flesh is shredded and blood spilt as alien fabric is brutally torn from flesh. Ryuuketsu heaves, seizing and spasming as she loses control of her body temporarily. Eyes maniac, Ryuuko's arm flexes as her grip on her swords tighten to pressures that could easily crush the densest of steel. Such is her enkindled nature that muscles easily strain against the thinnest sheet of pale flesh, visibly shaking. She raises them, but Satsuki notes that she appears to hesitate against striking her, steady cerulean orbs finding darting sangria unable to focus, to fully devote herself to attacking kin and yet not kin.

Blood flows freely from the wounds created as her twin blades- now reformed into daggers- have their grips reversed and their tips plunged into their owner. Scarlet arcs bite into the flesh above her breasts, exposing more of the alien threads that lay underneath. Over and over, she attacks herself, taking out her frustrations with the world on the only thing that could withstand such abuse. Roaring, she reaches deep into the wound, pulling apart skin and forcing ribs apart to reveal the delicate organs within. Pinprick sangria turns towards her, rabidly shaking within wells of white.

"I won't..." she snarls, tearing more of her skin apart with a sickening squelch and relishing in the agony as more of that dreadful god robe's influence waned with every anguished pull. "...Let myself... be tied down... by a single thread, and I ain't... gonna back down... so easily! Humans... weren't made... to be worn by clothing! People are people! Clothing is clothing!"

Wild-eyed, she turns back to Satsuki. "Fire," she growls, wincing as fresh pain surges through her nerves, growling when the head of Honnouji appears to hesitate, gun still held in relaxed hands. "Shoot me, Kiryuuin!"

And just as if she were suddenly startled from a reverie, she obliges, stepping forward until they are painfully close. Time slows to a crawl. Raising it to eye level, metal clacks, the heiress taking careful aim. The delinquent closes her eyes, waiting for impact. Satsuki whispers a prayer, loops a finger around the trigger, and...

BANG

Carefully, she cracks open an eye, absolutely fearful of what she is about to see. She looks down, finding her person neither any trace of damage, nor any indication that she had moved at all. In fact, she is now less than a foot away from her long-lost sister, hand securely fastened around her throat and beginning to squeeze the life out of her.

“No!” she shouts, finding that her body had begun to resist even as she pours all her strength into prying the fingers open. “Stop! **STOP!**”

But they are deaf to her pleas, and they merely increase their stranglehold to levels far intolerable by any mere human. Cries of absolute terror give way to deafening bellows as the god robe returns in full force and as bloodthirsty as ever. In fact, they only grow in volume as the green-haired kendo practitioner attempts to interfere, strikes that would level skyscrapers only serving to further annoy god robe incarnate. His attempts come to a drawn out close; in the end, he still was very much human, and humans were still very much limited by their breadth of stamina. Thrown against his partners and fellow elites, three of the most capable warriors are downed in an instant. Satsuki's breaths now come out as gentle wheezes, with deep blue dominating the blank canvas that was her face. Eyes narrowed into slits, she beholds the defeated enemies before her. That is, until a boulder the size of a small elephant was flung at her head.

Satsuki dropped and forgotten, she furiously locates and pins the squirming black kamui underfoot just as he finished regenerating and turns her rage upon the fighter opposite her. A star-clad fist flies at her face, but the human kamui swats it aside, irritable. Mako flips back, reaching deep inside her coat and flinging brass tacks. Ryuuketsu stares her down, letting them pierce torn flesh before flexing, shooting the projectiles right back at the hapless no-star. Switching tactics, she ducks low under a swing as what is now a poleaxe cuts into the air where her neck was, shaving off more than a few hairs as its sweep completes. She jabs, fists finding rock-hard abs that stubbornly counter any power she puts into it, making each one of her hits effective as thrown small pebbles.

The poleaxe is flung upward, blades disengaging from their locked position to become dual scissors once more. With a wrist flick, their form is changed yet again, metallic scrapings squeaking high as hidden mechanisms within force their mesh to drastically take shape. Limbs form, their ends curving gently to form wickedly sharp ends. What was formed like a bow's frame serves as a most unusual sword. Midpoint gripped, Ryuuketsu stands her ground as Mako charges, planting both spike-clad getas planting solidly against the weapon before pushing off. She twirls, loosing a golden chain flail that wraps around the red blades, wrenching it out of her grip and sending it spinning in the air, where it embeds into the ground far away.

The hybrid slides, propelling herself with unnatural force as she seeks to reclaim her prized possessions. And just as she lays hand upon its handle, she hears a burst of air, senses its ethereal ghost before it even hits her. In her peripheral vision, she sees a blur of white and black and red, slowly raising her hand and turning in her opponent's direction as-

CRUNCH

Ryuuketsu eyes her as the wooden weapon collides against an open palm, solid rock maple groaning audibly and cracks racing along its length as clawed fingertips issue a mere fraction of its strength upon it.

“Heh.”

The bat snaps easily in her hand, the human god robe easily tossing the pieces aside. Chocolate brown irises shrink, owner turning about face to whip to safety. Hands faster than a darting hummingbird wrapping tightly around a human neck kill such a plan, however. Mako coughs and sputters in her grip as it tightens the slightest bit, hands reaching up to claw uselessly where their flesh connected. Earth crunches as the bow-blade is removed from its improvised sheath, the blur of red twirling in her hand as the other drops the helpless no-star and pins her abdomen with her other foot.

“The host seems to care for you greatly,” Ryuuketsu growls with satisfaction, cocking her head as she aims to dice the fallen warrior before her into pieces. “So I’ll do her a favor by getting rid of you first.”

Dust erupts from shattered stone as the no-star is thrown against tiling with tremendous force. She half-steps forward, blades already whittling through the air and reaching Mako’s neck with unbridled force.

BANG!

Stunned, Ryuuketsu could only stare ahead, swords frozen in their descent. Opposite a smoking gun lay a tunnel freshly bored through her brain, where vibrant red threads hissed and writhed in attempt to heal. Mako gapes in horror, the merest splatter of blood streaking across her cheeks as Ryuuketsu’s quivering, pinprick-sized eyes slowly swivel to lock upon her own. In that moment, she senses more than fear seeping into the god-being’s body; a sense of mortal peril yet unparalleled. Normal bullets would have only annoyed her further and failed to prevent the girl’s decapitation, causing only minor loss of tissue and bone to the host before the life fibers within would repair it. Fiber-tipped bullets would have halted her for a fraction of a second. But these bullets did more than just pass through- they burned the very fibers that made up her body, searing her with an agony unlike that of being branded alive over and over and over again. And with this pain came an awakening. A stirring and rattling of chains within, the rousing of the host within.

BANG!

Another shot rips through her brain once more then another tears through weakened flesh, glancing off a rib and barely missing that which kept her alive. The human god robe's eyes screw up in agony, and she falters. A white blur, the still-weakened elder Kiryuuin closes the two-meter gap and blindsides her, rushing forward and barely brushing against her before kicking her away with a powerful side thrust kick that easily sends her flying off her feet. Ryuuketsu crashes against the wall, a burst pipe from above showering her with bone-chilling water and splattering the quivering no-star beside her.

Satsuki walks up to the fallen hybrid, tranquil water harshly sloshing with every thundering step. Marble crunches as the fires above spread, plaster and concrete falling to bury the entrance way to the primordial life fiber's chamber, preventing anyone from following while its guardian faces her fate. The remaining slivers of orange snake past the Nudists that fire upon it with paralyzing needles unbound, retreating far underground to safety. As she steps into the far end of the bath however, a new cage of fibers erupted from the floor and surrounded them, preventing anyone from escaping or letting everyone else come near the enclosed group. The remaining Nudist guerrillas try to intervene, but she half-turns to them and holds up an arm, keeping them at bay even as the cage bars close around them and shield all four from view. Bakuzans Kouryuu and Gako gripped in one hand and the pistol in the other, she advances confidently, keen eyes fixed on the heaving, quivering mass of flesh that was her younger sibling. Ryuuketsu heaves, body bowed over so that the untamed mass of hair hides her expression and heart thumping erratically within her chest. Guarded, she approaches from Mako's side, blades gripped tightly and eyes focused on every movement the other sibling made, every twitch and gasp for breath that gratingly rasped against her eardrums. With her wakizashi, she lifts the girl's chin up by its tip and turns her unresisting head toward her, not at all surprised to find that her eyes, rather than filled with hate, were instead imbued with relieved gratitude, weary and painted with the suffering of seven billion souls. A streaking brown blur catches her off guard, and the corners of her lips twitch upward as she witnesses the no-star embrace her dearest friend, now openly sobbing and not at all caring for preserving her own life.

"M... Mako..." Ryuuko whispers, looking past the outstretched weapon to her adopted sister below. "Hey, Mako. Look at me. I'm f- I'm fine." she murmurs comfortingly once more when the brunette slowly looks up to meet her gaze, smiling despite the gigantic hole in her chest, the smaller ones in her head, and the copious amounts of blood spilling to the water-covered floor. Tears are freely spilling down her face now, leaving clear salty trails along her cheeks and dripping down her chin. "H-Hey... where are those perverts? Are they okay? They make it out all right?"

She gulps, nodding slowly. "Yeah. They're fine."

Ryuuko closes her eyes partway. "Ah... Good. Wouldn't know what I'd do if... if I... you know... hurt them. I'm so glad... to see you again... Heh... you have no idea what it's like to have a kamui sewn into your fibers. Damn thing... wouldn't shut up!"

“Shh, Ryuuko-chan,” Mako whispers back, cradling her body and letting Satsuki press her forehead against her sister’s own. She is shaking, unnatural energy being funneled into small trembles wracking her lithe form and panic rising in her chest despite her attempts to keep calm. “It’s going to be okay, I promise. We’re going to go out on a cute date and-”

She hugs her oldest friend tighter in the spur of the moment, cap sliding off her head and landing messily about Ryuuko’s unmoving fingers when the latter quietly contradicts otherwise.

“Dummy!” she cries. “Dummy, dummy, dummy!”

Mako falls into hysterics soon afterward, words becoming uncharacteristically jumbled and inaudible. Comfortingly, the delinquent rubs the length of the other's arm and murmurs reassurances against the smaller girl’s ears, unable to do much else.

A pale hand trades a weapon for flesh, cautious fingers reaching under the mane to brush sodden bangs out of the way. The girl leans instinctively against the sibling's comforting touch, shuddering breaths freely wracking her chest. Blood freely continues to dribble from open wounds, covering her in a veritable bath of red that feeds into the polluted water like streams to an ocean. She looks like something of a warrior of old, painted in blood after a battle long-fought.

'How ironic,' Satsuki thinks to herself, watching as maroon orbs become half-lidded, eerily calm despite the severity of the situation. 'For this wretched place named as a bastion of cleanliness and purification to play host to such worldly impurities, unknowingly serving as the origin of true purification in its last day of existence.'

Ryuuko’s bleeding skin is clammy as the delinquent turns her focus onto her sister, hands trembling as they slowly hold the ex-President’s relaxed own, cupping around where the other held the pistol. Her smile droops a little, and her eyes take on a sad shine to them, all pretense of maintaining her relaxed guise shattered when she spots a familiar god robe peering from behind Satsuki’s leg.

Ruby swivels to meet sapphire.

Satsuki frowns, concerned. “Ryuuko?”

“I’m sorry, Satsuki...”

Hands extend and bring the tightly-gripped pistol into the open wound, where shredded fibers visibly attempt to rapidly seal it shut to no avail. Ryuuko rests the muzzle against the beating organ, making Satsuki’s eyes widen as she realizes its full implications.

“Take good care of the Mankanshokus for me, okay? They’re a good lot. ...Heh... Even those perverts... Might not have made it through the batshit crazy school you made if it wasn’t for them... They’re the best damned family I’ve ever had.”

Her heart clenches. Violently. It beats harshly as if it were her organ that lay against the weapon instead of Ryuuko's own.

No! Not now! Not so soon! Not when they had just reunited!

She half-crumples onto her knees and elbows, bowing her head low in deepest apologies to her reclaimed sibling for failing to protect her, for failing to find a way to bring her back sooner.

"Ryuuko, no I-"

"Kiryuuin," she whispers, and with it that shaky smile slowly stretches across her face again. "No... n-n-nee... nee... nee-san... you have to do it. There ain't another way out of this. I should know," a dry, mirthless laugh tore free, phlegm loosened by harsh fits of coughing. "Couldn't do anything while it was screwing with my mind. I'll kill you... I'll destroy the world if you don't... Junketsu... it's too strong... it's trying to take me over again... In minutes, I'll forget again. I'll lose my mind... my body... everything... Ragyou's gone... You can win... You can free humanity..."

A dark veil draped over her, Satsuki's hair spilling over her corrupted, beloved sister like a cleansing veil as the smaller pulls her forward, pulls her towards certain death.

She was strong. Ryuuko was stronger, that much was given. But to see her, one of the most stalwart, resilient people she's ever met reduced to begging for death!?

She chokes on her saliva, insides twisting horribly. "Matoi Ryuuk- !"

Ryuuko reaches over and does the very same thing she had once done to the very first person that actually cared about her, who gave her a home and a family and a sense of belonging - she kisses her hand sweetly. Softly. Her lips make the elder's skin tingle with warm, pleasant heat that reminds the latter of sun-kissed daydreams she had as a younger child, back when she imagined what having a younger sister would be like before her wretched witch of a mother stole her life away.

"Hey, Satsuki..."

Three tears impact bare skin where her mouth pulled away.

"I'm glad..." she whispers, sharpened ivory stained red with fresh ichor. "I'm glad I... got to say goodbye to everyone..."

Knuckles whiten, grip painfully squeezing the polished weapon's grip.

"Mat- no, Ryuuko... Please forgive me."

Ryuuko laughs- or at least, attempts to. Like everything else, it comes out weak and practically non-existent, birthed with a small shower of blood that sprays the air in fine particulate matter.

“It ain't even nothing, Kiryuuin. Don't even worry about it.”

Two spots of black draw to a close, Senketsu slithering up its fallen wearer's leg, eyes barely containing the flood of tears prickling at the very fabric of his being.

“Senketsu,” she breathes, relieved. She shouts happily in half-coughed barks of laughter, scooping her beloved kamui into her arms and holding him gently, wistfully scratching at lapel-brows and smiling nostalgically at the crudely written kanji written upon his label - a product of his own design in his joy at finally being named. “Look at you!” Ryuuko beams proudly, pinching his knot playfully and ruffling his top lovingly. “You have two eyes! You guys did it... You stopped the life fibers... Now all that's left... is to destroy the source...”

Cutting herself off, Ryuuko laughs bitterly, watching the life fibers in her body work to save her, to preserve her life for their own ends. For a few seconds, she switches her attention back to her partner and murmurs comfort to the inconsolable kamui, the kind expression in her eyes speaking volumes more than a few dozen words could ever hope to accomplish, seeming to transcend time and space in their absolute effectiveness.

“You better take care of Mako for me, alright? I'll rise up from my grave and kill ya if you don't. Don't worry about me. I'll be fine.”

These same formerly-blue eyes dart towards her sister as the crux of her drawn-out agony reaches its point, barely-restrained hatred filling them before she forcefully wills it away. The white kamui seethes in defiance from within, hands twitching as it starts wresting control away from its bonded.

“Sat... su... ki...” she growls in distorted tones, trembling violently as yet *another* wave of aggression screams through her veins, egging her mind to rip apart the *filthy naked ape* that dared lay hands upon her, a god in the making.

Three voices join in unison - “Ryuuko, please...”

Movements jerky and faltering as more of that *disgustingly* powerful feeling roils within once more, she loops Satsuki's fingers around the trigger just as the wound is almost sealed shut, pressing the tip of her finger against the elder's own. Their eyes meet, understanding and the *impossibility* of the situation's peaceful resolution easily flowing between them. And with the slightest coaxing, their world lights up in a brief muzzle flash of white and yellow.

The gun fires once.

Twice.

Ryuuko flinches reflexively, muscles spasming as pure agony shoots through them and forces her limbs to flail. Red splashes both of them like a purifying veil, fresh ichor contrasting the tainted purpose of the water beneath. Mako clenches to a limp arm like it's the last anchor in a world thrown to the hurricane winds, hyperventilating, skin pale and clammy and eyes unfocused. Satsuki murmurs something to both of them, soothingly rubbing the back of the younger no-star's hands with a thumb as the rest of the magazine is emptied directly into her sibling's pulsing organ, still furiously beating for dear life. More blood oozes out of the wound and splatters their bodies with every heart-wrenching trigger squeeze, sluggish as pressure within spliced arteries falls as rapidly as loosed boulders.

She is fading now. The light in her eyes is leaving, making her eyes appear glossy and dull. Her grip on this world is loosening, becoming weaker with every passing second despite the fibers' attempts to preserve her life.

Satsuki leans even closer and sings, voice low and choked with repressed sobs, audible to only she and the sister dying underneath. Even though she hides her despair well, tickling the younger sister's ear as she does so, it bleeds into the words. It is pained, coming rough and grating, like crow song attempting to imitate songbirds. The melody is sweet, if not simplistic and almost childish. Indeed, it was the same tune their mutual father had sang to her whenever he put her to bed as a small child or calmed her down. Tainted as French was in no small part due to their monster of a shared mother speaking it occasionally during less-than-savory moments, the language mattered little in comparison to its meaning. Disgust was traded for despair and bile that bit at her throat and roiled in her stomach was soothed with the image of their father singing those words alongside her, the only one that cared for and believed in the two of them. And in that private, shared moment, she channeled his being within her, wondering if this was what he foresaw when he rescued the defenseless infant from her fate over eighteen years ago.

“J'ai des tonnes d'histoires dans ma mémoire... visages d'amis qui veulent croire... Que plus rien n'est impensable, que plus rien n'est impossible...”

Ryuuko seems to enjoy it, extending a trembling hand and letting it falter before long ebony strands, coming short of bringing all three together as a fresh wave of pain makes her quiver. Instead, she settles for wrapping it tighter around the trio's extended hands, mind slowly slipping away from the present and focusing on only the utter calm of her sound, the sound of a heart's broken remains. Dutifully, Mako closes the gap betwixt them and holds Ryuuko close as the latter's eyes starts to slide halfway shut and the curve of her spine grows greater. Grateful, the delinquent puts the last spurts of energy her dying body held to use, placing a comforting hand atop the mop of brown hair and letting twitching, bloodied fingers twine themselves within the unkempt mess, letting their foreheads touch against each other in a gentle bump.

“Vivre! Suivre! Nos routes sans nous perdre de vue. Vivre! Suivre! Des doutes sans peur d'être déçus!”

Satsuki's voice grows quieter, more broken, the fading volume complementing the equally quieting life before it as her questing mind finds within her lonely past something else that

their father once told her. In her mind's eye, she pictures herself as a frightened four year old, wandering into the Kiryuuin family's lab and night for fear of the night. And she sees him smile in that special way of his before picking her up and letting her settle upon his lap while he worked, all the while murmuring the very same words to her before she inevitably would fall asleep. She knows not the meaning of these words, but they are sweet all the same.

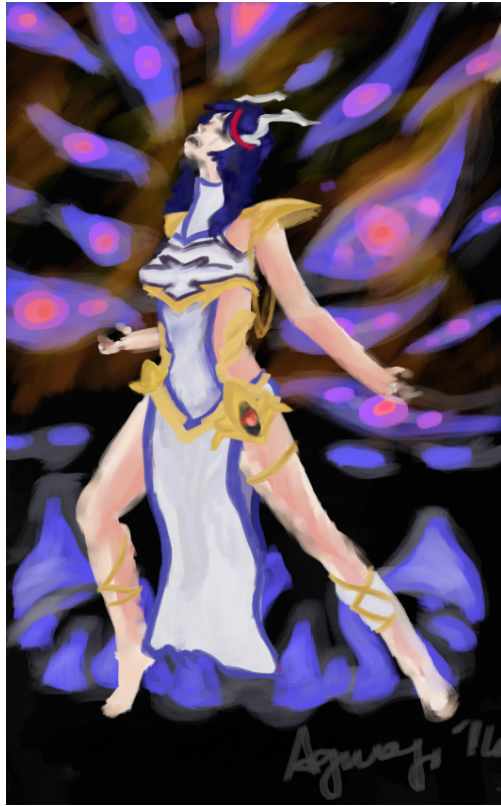
“Ensemble, il n'y a plus rien à craindre... ensemble... oui nous serons repeindre... Le monde dans tes couleurs... le monde sans tes douleurs. ...Et tu... redeviendras... l'auteur... de ta vie...”

Those gentle, beautiful red eyes of hers, so much alike and dislike those of Ragyou's, are all but dark now, the light having left them. Satsuki slides them completely closed with a gentle wave of her hand and, anointing the closed lids of her late sister with a solitary drop of blood in honor of those she saved, adjusts the corpse so that Ryuuko's head lies in her lap and her back against the floor. Senketsu is quiet, lapels drooping desolately and cuffs despondently placed upon the delinquent's forehead, miserably brushing away any errant strands of dampened hair plastered to her face. Mako sniffles beside her, eyes absolutely gushing as what can be merely described as a *torrent* of water pours from them, bathing her late friend. She bows her head, letting dark tresses completely shield her face from outsiders. Arms wind themselves around a nude torso, bringing it close to her own. Then and only then does Kiryuuin Satsuki shed tears for the sibling she lost not but once, but twice.

So engrossed in her grief that she neither notices the eldest Mankanshoku sibling reaching out to comfort her in the same way she had attempted to do so earlier, nor does she see the inky black tendrils that issue forth from Ryuuko's open wound. In that one instant of distraction, both she and Mako are ensnared and dragged into it, with the god robe being the last to slip inside. The last thing she remembers before her conscious flees from its corporeal prison in feathery soft wingbeats besides the bitter cold and the sensation of falling is the inexplicable feeling of unity, of absolute oneness and synchronicity with the universe.

“Ryuuko Kiryuuin, killer of queens, with a hunger to sunder the world!”

(Hymn of the Fiberborn, IX)



Chapter End Notes

衣人至上- Life Fiber Overdrive (Lit: “clothing people dominance/ascendance”, in slight deviation to kamui transformation naming convention). Ryuuko was supposed to have a Junketsu-Kouketsu armor after absorbing Ragyou and Shinra Kouketsu, but then I thought “why?”. And thus, Ryuu-ko/-ketsu became a human kamui and remained naked. A beta (without the multiple kamui layers) version is shown above. Ryuuko’s blackouts, mentioned in The Gauntlet and Blumenkranz, was Junketsu's doing.

神威 流潔 - Kamui Ryuuketsu. “Ryuuketsu” was chosen because it’s the Ryuuko x Senketsu ship name - in other words, the ultimate exemplification of their one-ness and platonic relationship. Here, Ryuuketsu is indeed “one”, but because Ryuuko gives up control of her body and powers to Junketsu - a complete reversal of the Senketsu-Ryuuko human-kamui dynamic. 神威 (“Authority of the Gods”) is used instead of 神衣 (“god robe”) to exemplify its current OP non-clothing status with absolute domination. 流潔 is made up of Ryuuko and Junketsu’s names and has female pronouns to contrast with Senketsu because Junketsu was using Ryuuko’s body.

Interestingly, Ryuuketsu (Senketsu + Ryuuko’s names) is 流血 (“bloodshed”/lit: “blood flow”). They are the only Kiryuuin canonically shown to never have [mass] murdered directly/by proxy. Isshin developing Senketsu led to Kinue’s death and Ryuuko's temporary death via experimentation (not counting possible deaths from presumed test subjects used for life fiber experimentation before the Kiryuuin siblings), Nui killed

Isshin, dozens are implied to have died under Satsuki's reign as Honnouji's dictator, and Ragyou let the O/PLF eat her entire employee body and servants, sans Soroi.

The song Satsuki sang is made from fragments of other songs - "La Tribu" and "Ensemble" from Le Subdigitals.

Le Rêve

Chapter Summary

She's a gunshot bride with a trigger, Christ, I'm just wondering what we've gotten ourselves into.

//

Mind is willing, soul remains, this woman cannot be saved from the jump into the fire.

Chapter Notes

Themes: “Le Rêve” (Herman Martin) and Heaven is Wrapped in Chains (Cinema Bizarre), with “Ad a Lib/I Want to Know” (Hiroyuki Sawano) growing progressively louder and drowning everything out at the end. Additional themes considered include “Afterlife” (Soimon) and “After the Fall” (Two Steps from Hell).

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

ワバラバダブダブズ

(I am in great pain; please help me)

You're... here.

It's nice to see you. Again.

We are bound together, you and I. Forever. Truly one being, flawless in unity. This bond that connects us, that lies inseverable, this is what makes us rise far above the lowly beings that shuffle beneath us, that should lie at our feet. You know that as well as I do.

You are mine now.

...

Clink, clink

Do you feel it?

Clink, clink

The pounding of a hammer against heated iron, your body, your soul?

Clink, clink

Molding you. Reshaping you. Reforging you from the weak human you were to something far more superior. No longer Matoi Ryuuko, nor Kiryuuin Ryuuko. Humanity traded for a purpose higher than that of kings.

Clink, clink

It doesn't matter if you grow cold, if you bend out of the shape I formed you. Metal can always be reheated, redrawn into the desired shape as many times as it takes. And we have plenty of time.

Do you think they will take you back, after all you've done? After everything you've said? They offered you so much, and yet you ran away from them when they needed you most, when they needed you to save them. When they cared for you, watched after you, only for you to turn your back on them. Why should they trust you again, when you've done so much to ruin it, when you've lost control of yourself and broke your promise to those that mattered most?

Admit it. You're not like them.

You never were.

You're alone. You always were, and nothing you do will ever change it.

Clink

But do not worry, for I am now with you always, and you with me. A human couldn't understand you, couldn't possibly grasp the magnificence that is your true calling.

You don't need them.

You don't need anyone.

And all you can do... is to walk towards the light.

You have no choice. You can go back with them and be forgotten and abandoned once more, or you can exceed your wildest expectations, to be the one that passes judgment, feel the power bristle beneath your skin and flow through your veins.

... You remember, don't you? When we bonded, and in exchange for your blood and subservience, I gave you unimaginable strength. When you crushed the bones of those that stood against you into dust, took your fate into your hands, and made something of yourself on your own terms, be it something others would deem a monster or a god.

Now...

Walk.

There it was again... that feeling... An aura that felt like it was watching her every movement, a smug predator toying with its next meal, pinning its helpless prey to bloodied ground and taking amusement in its frenetic behavior, its uselessly flailing limbs and failed attempts at escape.

(I love you.)

She started abruptly, her mouth mechanically moving on its own to respond likewise to the invisible entity before snapping shut once more. A mindless, meaningless gesture, but a gesture nonetheless.

Red bled from her body, taking the form of the mist that twirled in the air on a snowy day with every breath, fading to pink and eventually white. Motes of color spiraled and twisted, wavering and undulating as they did so. They ebbed and flowed in flickering pulses, the void vanishing them the air like tongues of lapping flames, hungrily sucking them into itself as if a plug had been pulled and a tub's contents left to drain.

Alone in her prison, she shivered miserably, feeling the cold strike her to the bone, sapping what little strength she possessed and eating her away. She wasn't sure how long she had been here. No instruments of timekeeping there were to be had, only the seconds that she kept ticking in her head. But even then she lost count, reaching one hundred thousand, and one hundred thousand again, over and over, millions of seconds wasted.

Her head had been clearer as of late, with the buzzing white noise fading into static at her brain's rear. A mind divided, tenuous connections began to reform, shattered bits of consciousnesses converging, forming a Ryuuko once more rather than a stringed marionette bearing the same name. Slowly but surely, she began to piece herself together, simple facts weaving together like cloth, joining the muddied waters of memories that seemed both real and fake. And yet, a pressure focused on her temples bore down with crushing weight, squeezing upon her skull like a hand with a lump of dough, clawing and compressing like a press until -

The hair on the back of her neck prickled and stood on end.

A feeling unlike that of rising tides swept over her, as did an unpleasant bout of nausea. In the distance, she could hear someone shouting, someone laughing. Someone with a voice that incited both rage and familiarity, a miasma of feelings that rapidly ping-ponged between confusion and disgust as it crowed and shamelessly boasted, taunted and hurt with reckless abandon - her own.

And then, she heard another. And another. And another. Until three voices - two belonging to those she held dear with all her heart, and one she long-bitterly loathed - filled her ears with their sound, their music. And it came to her as clear as crystal ringers knocking against their bells, floating by on a summer breeze until they were the only thing that occupied her thoughts, drowning the god-thing's presence completely and easily vaporizing the remaining fog that had gathered around her like sunlight to the clouds.

A thought, flashbulb visages of a friend, a closest confidant that warmed her very being, reaching out to her and connecting, joining spirits. An amalgamation of ideas hard to describe, to fully put to words what they were. A feeling so strong and so powerful that it shook her to her very fibers, sweeping her in a rushing tornado of images of months past that she could not help but shout his name, vibrate in barely-contained excitement when they drew closer and had their souls eclipse.

And then, utter devastation when it was suddenly ripped from her, leaving her in the cold once again, where she waited, feeling the choking aura surround and squeeze the life out of her once more until the least likely thing she expected to happen, did.

A song.

Not in any language she recognized, it proved oddly soothing and eerie at the same time. And just like that, the force was banished, replaced by a soothing motion not unlike hands kneading over aching muscles.

She was tired. So tired.

The waters rose again, threatening to take her conscious under once more, but she no longer fought against it, against the currents that seemed to suck her further beneath to depths yet untouched by light. Like a drowning man, she had clawed towards the surface, to shattered pieces of driftwood, but no longer. She understood. She was going to die, but she wasn't afraid anymore. Waves of exhaustion passed over her, and she was content to let them roll her over and tumble her about in their might, quite satisfied that she was no longer needed in the world, that her body need not suffer any longer. And like the storm, a typhoon raging over frothing waters, she was pushed under again and again, sinking deeper and deeper until fleeting thoughts were the only thing that kept her company.

I'm going to...

I'm going to...

I'm...

She breathed.

Silence.

Peace.

White. Red. Gold.

Sometimes, she dreamed of a meadow in a place far away, where the long-stranded grass was a vibrant viridescent shade, and nothing save for wildflowers and a lone church in the distance existed. For some reason, it seemed to call to her with angelic chimes and deep booming bell tolls, promising an unearthly sense of peace and being. And quite often, she'd try to walk over to it, curious to see why such a building would exist in an odd little location, but the closer she seemed to get, the further away it drifted, like a small ship adrift in the ocean's tumultuous waves. And when she tried walking backwards, and even in the opposite direction, the church stayed the same distance away, seemingly rooted to the spot.

But distance didn't stop her from seeing what lay inside, what clamored for her attention and gnawed at the edges of her mind. A bird on heated currents, she flew, passing through walls as if they were mere shadows and melding into the scene. A very familiar, haunting scene that seemed real. Felt real. Was real.

An altar.

A bride.

Her, the sacrifice? An offering?

Her, being groomed in more ways than one, when the figure bent over and whispered something in her ear as vows were exchanged?

Ryuuko stirs lazily, basking in the serene morning sun's rays as it touched upon her battle-marked body, the garter of plain white-colored underwear barely peeking from beneath luxurious silken sheets. A hand snakes past a particularly nasty scar centered over where her heart was - a minor consequence of having one's ribs ripped open and ravaged with bullets - and lazily traces over its form, feeling the great canyon that decorated flesh like crater-impacts on painted moons. She yawns, the threat of any perverted beings sneaking in to leer at her nearly-naked form as far away as the orbiting moons of galaxies distant, and stretches out her toes, wiggling the tiny phalanges as the soft yellow the sun provided brightly lit her room. The air is scented with florals, of lavender and incense and cloying vanilla - a staple of the newly built household. She sighed, and suddenly, -

- She was falling.

The bedroom gave way to the cosmos, a veritable bath of stars amid inky darkness. And she plummeted, streaks of pure colors caressing her, clothing her body in dresses of fuchsia and

violet, of phthalocyaninic hues and blood so freshly drawn. Her sheets burned and smoldered about her, tearing away in fading embers as the universe grew smaller and a world smeared in shades of black and grey below drew nearer and nearer, but the fires that touched her were as cold as polar vortices, as ghostly as intangible breezes. The fallen battlefield of Honnouji Academy seemed to rush up in greeting, welcoming one of its champions back home once more. And with it, a group of very familiar and *very* welcome faces, a blocky white horde of dozens that collectively raised their arms and shouted her name, catching her as she slammed against their bodies, her immense momentum sending them far to the arena's end and rendering the main tower a stunning mirror image of that of Pisa's famous upon impact.

She slowly rolls over once they skid to a stop and protectively hold each other close in a huddled pile, a band of something shiny wrapped around her pinky and ring fingers glimmering in the light. At her side, many pairs of hands wrap around the small of her waist, gently supporting her body with theirs. She cranes her neck to the side and smiles gently at the closest that beheld her, eyes twinkling with unparalleled joy as their naked skin brushed against her own.

"Welcome home, Ryuuko," a warm voice whispered in her ear, strands of hair as dark as hers, as lengthy as the story of two long-lost siblings tickling her nose.

"I'm home..." she whispered back, nuzzling the crown of her head against the other's lower jaw. "I'm home, sis..."

She blinked dreamily, pointed enamel glimmering faintly in the little light as lips twitch into the thinnest of smiles as a woman with eyes the color of mint and turtle shells pleasingly responded in kind. A pair of hands comfortingly massaged her shoulders, and Ryuuko turned, brushing a skein of perfectly curled gold pigtails out of the way as gradient light framed their bared forms. They relaxed in each other's presence, gazing at the sky above, now suspiciously empty and completely devoid of stars.

It was paradise.

It was purgatory.

It was cold and dark -

- And Mankanshoku was nowhere near her.

At first, she was notably distressed, as would someone else be in her predicament. Then, realizing that there was no bottom at the end of this void, she relaxed and allowed herself to think. She needed to find Senketsu and Mako, and leave, saving Ryuuko in the process if possible. Satsuki knew that she had been falling for a while. A roar of white noise surrounded her, tainted with faint animalistic screeches and voices both familiar and unknown and positioned as such that it was impossible to escape from, enveloping her whole. She felt an

oppressive aura bear down and tear at her, as if consciously aware of her intruding presence and was attempting to extract her - or her life - by any means possible. And as it raged against her, she felt the warmth gradually leave her body, bleeding away in wisps of misted azure-white against the inky black background, its immense hunger and will to consume her completely.

She lashed out, the wall of sound retaliating in kind with savage whip-snaps that cracked at her bared skin. She tumbled, twisting past that which reached out to ensnare and crush her within its titanic grip, diving past outstretched limbs of white and blue.

A flutter of black cloth soon caught her eye, dancing at the edges of her vision and flapping about quite a distance away. She gasped.

Senketsu!

They fell, hands and sleeve-ends reaching out and clawing futilely through the maelstrom, grasping and touching the tips of their respective bodies. She locked her limbs against her body, steely resolution set against battering winds that howled past, skimming the currents until her crown slid past his hem and her body was enshrouded by his cloth.

The explosion of their resulting synchronization drove their assailant back, but served to anger it as well.

And so, armed with more than her unbreakable will and sheer determination, she pushed back with all her might, teeth grit and every muscle tensed as invisible winds slashed and gouged red rivulets upon peachy cream. Both she and the force were locked once more in a familiar struggle of wills, a bitter struggle with both sides evenly matched, waiting until the eventual give. It struck out, and she snapped her blades back, the twin swords miraculously having fallen and tangled within the kamui's cloth without even so much as tearing it. Eventually, Satsuki noticed it waver, and she pressed her advantage. Soon enough, it fell back, and it allowed her to continue her fall uninhibited

All

The

Way

Down

Towards a blip of white at the end of the tunnel.

She steeled herself and waited for the end, vision tumbling and jerking as her body crashed against the pane of light with a sickening crack before cutting away to darkness.

She awoke to a field of flowers of all shapes and sizes, of colors and scents. Lifting her head, she surveyed the safe haven with lazy eyes, basking in the sun's rays and breathing in the light perfume of that which surrounded her. Her body sang at the light touch of the earth beneath her, points on her body entirely sore from the exertions of the past hours being soothingly licked away, wicked from bruised muscles and drawn into the atmosphere itself as if she were plunged into a luxuriously hot bath.

The spiked cape that adorned her uniform spilled out underneath her in a great undulating wave of glossy black and vibrant red. Her cap had slid off, and the clover that seemed to perpetually be stuck between her teeth now lazily lay at the side of her lips.

She rolled, holding a flower's petal between two fingers and experimentally rubbing it between them. And, smiling gently as they tickled her bare skin, was content to lie there forever, to exist in this simple plane of existence.

A tug pulled at her heart. A single flitting thought suddenly crossed her mind at an unexpected noise, jerking her back into reality and reminding herself of the dire need at hand. Electricity surged through her nerves at its very appearance, jolting her upright with a drawn-out gasp.

Ryuuko!

She scrambled to her feet, hair cascading about her ears in waves of hazelnut brown. Giggled laughter continued to respond to her in kind, leaving the no-star blinking in confusion. She looked up, jaw hanging loose and her features twisted in complete astonishment when she saw *her*.

"Ryuuko?"

Ryuuko continued to howl with laughter from where she was perched, joyfully waving an arm and calling out to a white-haired woman below.

"Mommy, mommy! Look how far I can climb!"

More of the ghostly laughter, followed shortly after by a cavalcade of rustling branches and leaves. A red bang bobbed in joyous rapture. Mako blinked, gaping at the tiny child, and then at the unfamiliar woman before her that gently reached up and pulled the girl from the branches, setting her down below and lovingly cooing over her progress.

"Ryuuko!"

Joy singing in her heart at finally having reunited with her friend, no matter how strange her appearance may be, she pounced in her trademark tackle, only for her face to solidly meet soil. Like phantoms, the people before her flickered and ghosted back into existence, still animatedly talking as if a brown and black bullet hadn't tried to bowl them over.

She coughed, forcing dirt from her lungs and grass from her teeth, hands blindly groping for her trademark cap before slapping it back onto its rightful place. Chocolate brown watched them leave and gradually fade out of existence, only for them to reappear at her side with the

same actions on the same tree, the same giggling and calling and boasting about how far the younger managed to climb like scratched records, a tape rewound and played over again in an infinite loop.

Her stomach churned, and she quickly left, soon seeing a break in the forestry.

The land was disjointed, as poorly-rendered with little rhyme or reason to its organization, like an artist's fever dream, a scenery made by the hurried arrangement of things to give off the mere semblance of normality. Buildings jutted out of the ground, a populated town jutting out of the hillside before ending abruptly in forest. Roads were built, ending at random intervals outside the town's center like ragged strips of paint from a paint job unfinished. City skyscrapers dominated the rear, with swaths of cleared soil dotting the area. Rusting skeletons of what were supposed to be buildings stood empty, as if they were an afterthought. Faceless specters drifted along cobblestone roads, vanishing when they crossed the threshold and reappearing at the furthest end of the street to walk their predetermined path once more. Mako walked further inside, her confusion breaking past previously set records as she entered a clearing, seeing multiples of Ryuuko and that strange white-haired woman wherever her head turned. A birthday party, a graduation from junior high... none of the Ryuukos she saw didn't go anywhere without the unaging woman following close behind, showering her with praise and adoration.

She frowned, cape trailing behind and billowing in Mankanshoku-generated wind as she ran past, seeing more Ryuukos, more Ragyou. All remained blissfully ignorant of her intruding presence, too absorbed in playing out their gestures and speeches over and over again.

Surely this woman wasn't the same woman that wanted to destroy the world for an unfathomable reason, wasn't the person that seemed to scoff at the very thought of showing even the barest shred of affection towards anyone else, much less think about doing so in the first place.

And then -

Mako understood.

The gilded cage that Ragyou trapped her in, the thing that Ryuuko wanted most - it was all here, though as a shadowy mockery, a farce created to mark the girl as her own.

She ran even harder, following the tug on her heart that seemed to grow more powerful, unquestionably livelier with every step she took in the right direction. She ran until her legs ached, until muscles hissed as lactic acid bit away at their being. But as she crossed out of the city-forest, another thing caught her attention, a beacon so irresistible in the way it sparkled, in how it magnificently rose above everything else. She gaped at its unparalleled body, hands pressed against flushed cheeks.

A church?

It couldn't be. Not here, at least. But then again, she'd seen stranger things in her life. Man-eating clothing, for example. All she knew was that somewhere deep inside, the very visage of that building resonated with her heart, beckoning her forward. And distantly, some part of

her knew that Ryuuko was inside - the Ryuuko that was buried underneath the pain, beneath the confusion, the Ryuuko she befriended, the Ryuuko that protectively took care of her and scared off those that had previously bullied her.

Casting one last look behind, she set off, adjusting her cap as she strolled away from paradise and into the unknown once more.

The first thing she noticed was the air around her.

Something that felt not quite unlike silk and satin brushed by and wrapped around her like choking mist on a moonlit night, suffocating her in its tender hold. Its irresistible warmth radiated pure comfort and contrasted the chilled air greatly, inviting the urge to curl upon herself and sleep, as if layers of comforters were wrapped about her and she had just awoken to a lazy Saturday morning. Thoughts slowed to a crawl like a river of molasses and even her adamant strength struggled under its weight as more materialized around her trembling body and clung tenaciously like cobwebs, pinning her arms to her sides.

“Sen...ket... su...” she gritted out, the black kamui grunting and straining under its immense power, barely managing to respond on his own.

She couldn’t think, it was hundreds of thoughts and emotions and feelings impacting her at the same time, reducing her thoughts into a jumbled mess.

She cried out again, willing her body to move, to react, only to be cut off by the god robe himself.

“Sen...ket...su...sen...jin...!”

A tornado of red ripped through the white expanse, shredding hair-thin fibers that sought to trap, to ensnare. They blazed through in an ebony whirlwind, reveling in the sharp cracks of snapping threads, coming to a halt only upon sighting an unusual target.

Naked and strung up, Ryuuko was bound with limbs harmlessly pinned above and below by intricate binds. A single fiber wrapped extensively around her arms and legs and body, weaving in simple ties and leaving her suspended midair. Eyes closed and breathing relaxed, she appeared to be asleep, deceptively harmless within the hostile dreamscape that surrounded her. She looked serene - peaceful, even - as she hung there with not even the slightest sign of an internal struggle.

“Ryuuko,” Satsuki breathed, and - foolishly, she thought - brushed a palm along the length of her sibling’s outer thigh.

A spark snapped at her fingertips, and she drew her hand back in mute surprise. Ryuuko’s eyes fluttered half-open then, and her head tilted downward. A small, dreamy smile on a face

clouded with sleep briefly greeted the elder Kiryuuin before the head dipped down once more, with breathy gasps for air being the only thing that kept her company.

Satsuki fingered twin Bakuzan carefully, blades twirled into position in-hand and making a move to saw through the fibers that bound, but steely eyes completely widened in surprise when the dual swords merely passed through, red threads seemingly flickering in and out of sight like a mirage. She tried again with Senketsu's kamui-claws adorning her hands, a slight tremble wracking her form when, for a moment, she felt as the god robe did while cleaved the threads, feeling their malevolent presence. A marionette with its strings cut, Ryuuko bonelessly dropped face first to the ground below with a dull thud, where she lay unmoving for a time.

Frowning, Satsuki crouched and ran the back of a hand over the younger's skin once more, ice creeping into her veins when she realized the cause. Ryuuko was still.

Cold.

Dead.

And much like this world's owner, the void of light where cracks and chipped fragments of the vacuum-space insidiously crept far past the cornered edges, it was dying as well. Distantly, some part of her realized that the alien threads within Ryuuko's body had sought her and Mankanshoku out for the same reason the life fibers themselves drank from the well of life from countless worlds - self-preservation. And now that it had her here and she had successfully fought its efforts off, they were dying together.

The ground beneath her feet rocked dangerously, and she started, efforts to bolt to her feet fiercely renewed.

"Humans were meant to serve clothing. It is their destiny," a familiar voice whispered, and Satsuki's blood ran cold, arctic sweat imperceptibly swathing her form as the distant words assaulted her ears. "They were born for this purpose..."

She turned slowly. Painfully. Fearfully. And rage filled her heart immediately, red filling her vision and blood pounding in her ears the longer she looked. Ragyou and Nui, naked and lying beside a similarly undressed Ryuuko, flanked the latter's side and caressed her gently, intimately laying their hands upon her and stroking the length of her body as if to solidify their claim upon her. It wasn't the Ryuuko she remembered - it was a Ryuuko with lively chrysanthemum-colored eyes and a personality far softer than the jagged delinquent-type one she usually exhibited-, but she didn't care. She wouldn't let even the phantom shade of her mother corrupt the only living family she deemed worthy enough of the title (even if said recipient didn't care to be included within the family lineage in the first place), and she'd be damned if it was going to happen under her watch. She stepped forth mechanically with fine-sharpened blades at her sides, unwaveringly staring the three of them down with unfettered disgust.

SHING!

Bakuzan Kouryuu sang its lethal song as the black blade whistled through the air and sliced through the ghost of her mother's chest. And surprisingly, it worked, running lines over pale skin and ripping deep chasms into flesh. A death rattle breathed with hissed curses of ancient times past were all that remained of her dying scream, the gaudy vessel representing her body disintegrating in fine particulates and ethereal wisps of dark smoke. Nui shared a similar fate soon after at the hands of the tanto, her last breaths caught in between a maddened half-cry, half-laughed shriek upon destruction.

Now turning to her sibling, Satsuki extended a hand to Ryuuko, but the latter drew back in a flurry of bare limbs and muted whines. Blue irises drew close to the blackened centers, beautifully hued swaths of cobalt shrinking until they were no more than dots awash in a sea of white. A pained look - and was that pure terror? - marred her face, twisting it until it became ugly and riddled with gaunt lines and shadows. Her entire body was tensed, every nerve in her body screaming to act, to bite and kick and claw. To escape. Even her hair seemed to flare up dramatically - a more than clear warning twitching within every muscle that she was prepared to fight to the death should the situation come to a head. Hurt and confusion briefly flickered across Satsuki's own before she remembered that this was not the true Ryuuko, that this Ryuuko saw her murder two others in cold blood without preamble. Perhaps she only saw her as the ruthless dictator of a high school academy that had no problems with executing students and subjecting them to life-threatening scenarios on a near-constant basis. Perhaps this Ryuuko didn't think of her as a true sister, and instinctively knew her only as someone unfortunately related by blood-ties, a monster who could only give others pain and could offer no relief of her own. Perhaps she instead thought her only as a random stranger that happened to execute what the delinquent thought was her entire family right before her eyes.

Realizing her presence was more threatening to her standing than it was when she was leveled with the younger, Satsuki lowered herself until they met eye to eye, hand still outstretched and knees pressed resolutely against terra firma. A child with trimesters rewound, Ryuuko cowered, curling into a small ball on all fours and trembling violently. Senketsu's words of reassurance served only to terrify her even further - as did any other time when voices that magically appeared out thin air were wont to do -, sharp pitiful cries of fright responding to deeply resonating baritone. Presenting herself smaller and insignificant, her hunched body served as well to protect her weakest points from attack. Innately sending the message of her absolute submission, she trembled like a caged thing, a mistreated animal beaten until it knew only its master's violent tendencies and feared for its life with every passing second. And much like a caged beast, she whimpered, wide eyes peering from underneath a shaggy mane and focused with pinpoint accuracy upon the hand that offered so much, and yet took more.

But in spite of this, Satsuki did not falter, did not withdraw her silent offer to the shell of a sibling.

Neptune orbited the sun once per one hundred sixty four years and two hundred eighty nine days. Strontium atoms oscillated four hundred and thirty trillion times per second. One thousand six hundred forty years passed. It was four hundred and thirty trillion oscillations by four hundred and thirty trillion times more before the naked girl quit her antics and slowly started to crawl forward, abnormally shaped eyes now fixed on the other's with enkindled embers flaring in their depths.

The elder remained still, posture relaxed and both hands in front to assuage the younger's fears. Ryuuko stopped a meter away, still unsure of the hand that had brought countless suffering to others, knowing the fatal consequences if she judged wrong. Gear-shaped orbs nervously flicked back to the outstretched limb, darting between it and the dictator's own eyes like a flitting hummingbird's wings. Thoughts of slapping the other's out of the air and fleeing or attacking out of sheer terror filled her head, each more tempting than the last. She reached her own hand out, small cobalt orbs darting between the other's face and the splayed fingers...

...And hesitantly, she took it.

Satsuki brought the girl to her height with a gentle tug. Legs faltered, bending inward. Ryuuko stumbled and clenched a wad of Senketsu's front for dear life, the god robe's eyes watering as she pulled - hard - on his lapel-crests by accident. Finding that the other could no longer support her own weight, Satsuki allowed the red-streaked girl to wrap her arms around her torso, her legs around her waist, and be carried around her front like a child - a fitting resolution given what was actually happening at the moment.

Ryuuko shrunk. Limbs drew back upon themselves, and years fell away. Clothing blossomed out of the lingering red threads that surrounded them. And within seconds, a girl of no more than six or seven years of age was left clinging to the Student Council President, clad in nothing but a simple red blouse, a plain white skirt, and scuffed white sneakers. Satsuki stared. Ryuuko stared back, enlarged pupils the color of oxidized silver bleeding timidity and trust. And almost uncharacteristically, the former student council president wrapped one of her own arms around the smaller girl's back and murmured reassurances in her ear.

"We're going to get you out of here."

Wordlessly, Ryuuko nuzzled her face against her sister's radiant warmth, blissfully unaware of the relieved glances Senketsu shot her way. And as small hands looped around the heiress's neck, she pulled Ryuuko away from her far enough to carefully look her in the eye.

"Can you help us? We need your help to find our friend and get out of here."

The child paused, a pained insecure look flitting across her face momentarily. A thick, aristocratic brow quirked.

“Ryuuko?” she gently probed, frowning when more of the void rocked under an invisible explosion and shattered like broken glass before them. “We don’t have much time. We need to get out of here and find Mankan- Mako.”

And after a moment more passed did the child nod, mutely pointing towards the furthest corner - the least damaged nook by far - of the blinding white expanse with a tiny trembling finger. She frowned, focusing on that tiny blip. In the distance, a twinkling mass caught her vision, the sight of which looked exceptionally promising. And so she ran.

And ran.

And ran, feeling her imouto’s tiny heartbeat against her own, a musical duet of two battered warriors. Ryuuko scrunched in further, tense, flinching every time an ominous crunching sound seemed to reverberate through the entire space.

“How about a story?” Satsuki asked in between panted breaths, awkwardly attempting to soothe the girl by running a hand down the latter’s back in short repetitive strokes. “To pass the time.”

Ryuuko’s squirming instantly stilled, and a feathery mass of navy tickled at her neck as the child craned her head up to meet her weary stare, completely enraptured by its intensity. Taking her silence as permission, she spoke.

“There was a girl.

“She was once someone like you, but when she was five years of age, her father took her to see his life's work, a creation he helped birth into existence through countless years of research.

“*‘Satsuki,’ he said, ‘this will be your wedding dress, but when you put it on, you will become a slave to clothing.’*

“She didn't understand what he meant at the time, but he then told her everything, of the life fibers, of the death of her sibling in cold-blood, of a plot for the world's destruction. He told her of everything he knew. He must have been desperate to entrust this knowledge to a child yet molded by the world, to someone who was completely powerless and ignorant, to a person that could have otherwise dismissed the notion as her father playing pretend.

“But then he was assassinated, killed viciously on the command of his former wife by those that once served him, and she understood. And so she changed, recruiting those she saw fit to flank her in the charge as her generals, seeking out a place to call her own. And in the middle of a tiny bay, she did, christening its supports as Honnouji, the apex of her revolution.

“And she built upon that rock a kingdom of concrete and steel, a fortress unbowed and unbroken to be used against those that wished to enslave humanity, by - ”

“ - Ssssaattssssuukiiiiiii...”

Blood frozen in her veins, she skidded to a halt, words dying where they lay on her tongue.

Shadows licked at her feet, wicked tendrils slithering around where she turned slowly, breath leaving her lungs in a soundless cry as a distant pool of dark liquid drew closer like the rising tide. She felt their innate desire to rend them to bits and consciously held the tiny girl a little tighter, shooting glares at the black writhing shapes. There was a violent hiss alike torrents of water pouring upon roaring flames, a frothing bubbling that ebbed forth from its depths like hellish pools of heated lava as it simmered and singed and burnt away all life. It flopped over and over and over, twisting upon itself like melted wax mannequins as the eldritch pit gave birth to a moaning abomination, a wretched thing that slowly crawled after them on all fours, hallowed ground desecrated by its thunderous stomps. Ragyou - or rather, what was left of her after the forced assimilation - wrenched itself forward when the elder stood rooted to the spot, transfixed as it sprouted wing-like shapes from its sides and a sickeningly familiar gradient glow about its top. From a burbling head, "Satsuki..." was quietly crooned once more, sickly sweet and grating tones issuing forth from a mouth alike that of splitting seams created from parting halves as a hand dripping with inky black reached out towards her. It burbled, a melting mass reaching towards them with an odd creaking sound much alike that of muscles being freed from rigor mortis and beckoning with a misshapen finger. "Sie mit uns. Schlaf mit uns. Come. With. Us."

Satsuki ran.

It raced after her, pained howls and groans intermingling unpleasantly with its heavy panting. Trapped between planes of physicalities, it bobbed within the liquid-like pool, twisted form emerging with every leaping stride before sinking halfway once more upon impact with the enlightened ground. Thick, ropy strands of the shimmering material kept it tethered to the growing sprawl of inky black, veiny tendrils that clawed and pulled it back.

The world collapsed around them, becoming a whirlpool of sound and white noise once more, the prison-world shattering like broken glass. Enormous shards of the material crashed, crystal and diamond pieces sparkling upon impact.

SHINK!

Razor-sharp fragments taller than the strongest of her elites rocked the ground before her. She dodged, pushing off to the side and neatly vaulting over another splintered sky-fragment.

The ground below fissured faster than she could run, cracks racing under where heeled soles chattered against the glassy plane.

Faster, faster!

Leg up! Leg down!

Ragyou was rushing. Ragyou was roaring. Ragyou increased its speed, mutilated legs thrusting it forward, coming in a single whistling trajectory as if it was fired from an invisible rifle.

She felt the sickly bands of vibrant purple rise, towering over her like cloaked gods of ages past, waiting to pass judgment over mortal crimes. Ryuuko buried her face in Satsuki's chest, violent trembling wracking her to the bone as Senketsu tried to comfort her, attention divided between his charge and boosting his current wearer's speed.

They dove with hushed whispers, the air itself seeming to bend and twist about them to allow them past.

Go, go, go!

They slammed into the ground, breaking it underneath their feet. A gloved hand swiped out, reaching for the tenuous safety the remaining ground gave as the chasm between life and uncertain fate rapidly grew.

And...

She fell.

Ryuuko helplessly grasped at red suspenders, wailing. Satsuki looped an arm around her back, squeezing her that much tighter.

I'm done! It's over!

“Senketsu shippu!”

Glittering bursts of pink and red carried the trio to safety upon the god robe's shout, rocketing them upward with a thunderous roar. Purple ribbons darted forward like cobras, snapping at their feet, cutting them off at every corner and relentlessly pursuing them no matter how brightly the rockets blazed, no matter how fast the dark kamui carried them.

And so they landed firmly on crumbling ground, sending fragments of it leaping for the skies upon Mach 1 impact.

Twin points of red dug into the fragile opaque surface beneath, and stomped powerfully. And with a dainty tinkle, it shattered, creating a growing chasm that ran along the length of the endless world.

But it proved no match for their dogged foe, for it merely used the crumbling pieces as a springboard, darting and leaping off of them with no more exertion than one would use whilst walking up a flight of stairs.

The elder hybrid slashed the moment it cleared the canyon, and Satsuki hissed as claws sharper than knives slipped past her blades and blossoming streaks of red decorated her calves. She launched into the skies once more, twin Bakuzan raised above and an air-shaking war cry splitting the space between, but the Ragyou-thing's grotesque hand wrapped around her calf, gleefully smashing her against the ground and relishing the sick crunches that resulted.

Ryuuko whimpered as she was knocked out of the heiress' hands, coming to an unevenly gradual halt as her body flopped and tossed about like a ragdoll. Satsuki cried out in abject horror, body flung aside once the monster grew bored of playing around and decided on stalking after its actual prey instead.

The wave of incoming black drew closer, rising above her ankles as it approached, Senketsu hissing and shivering at the unfamiliar feeling upon contact. Satsuki grimaced, fully

expecting the pool to rear up and consume her like it attempted to do with the specter of the late-mother, to tie her down and hold her drowning beneath its mass.

But it didn't.

The liquid instead rushed past, completely ignoring her presence and darting after that which ailed its long-suffering host. Ragyou leapt, ripping completely free of blackened bindings, clawed arms outstretched and a slimy tongue snaking past rows of shark-like teeth, howling and madly shrieking in excitement as the helplessness of its prey pushed it over the edge. Satsuki rolled onto her back just as her sister scrambled onto all fours, fleeing from the monster giving chase.

Paf paf paf paf

Tiny feet sped their owner along the ruined world faster than normally possible, spiriting her to the safety of the elder sibling's arms.

50 meters...

45...

She stumbled, tripping on snares unseen, almost broke pace and fell victim to the world's whims. She clamped her jaws, blood rushing, blood pounding, blood heating her cheeks and burning her vision a blaring white at its edges. Gasping, flailing her hands, short legs tensing, coiling, muscle knotting and becoming almost excruciatingly painful in their exertion after long disuse.

40...

"Ryuuko..." Ragyou groaned, voice raspy like thinned bark discarded and twigs shed by arboreal parents. "Come... here..." The thin surface beneath their feet trembled with every fleeting step she took. "Ryuuko... I'm so hungry... I need you... Don't abandon your mother... She loves you... You love your mother and want to help her, don't you...?"

35...

Faster, faster!

30...

The clatter of thin ice beneath, sick crunching growing louder with every passing second. The heavy panting that seemed to lick at the back of her neck, Ragyou all around her, all about her, herding her like common sheep to a slaughter.

25...

20...

Almost there!

15... 15...!

No, no no no no no no!

Triumphant, it knocked her down and pinned the squirming girl to the ground with a paw, and with a hungry snarl, buried its teeth deep into the junction between neck and shoulder. Ryuuko's screams instantly jumped three octaves, desperate squeals intensifying the longer enamel melded with flesh. And from sharpened fangs, a vibrant purple issued forth, seeping into the wound and running through torn veins, drawing out the red aura that so deliciously lay within and threading it back to its master.

Slag fell, the writhing black that burned and bit at the monster's skin tumbling free to reveal peachy skin and hair as white as the snowfall. Stealing that which the girl contained within to fend off that which sought to destroy her, a parasite prospered, returning to its youthful, more human appearance the longer it drank. Ragyou smiled against the squirming girl's flesh, gently shushing her as claws returned to hands and scaled leather to supple flesh.

"Get away from her," Satsuki growled, heels brutally stomping into the elder hybrid's side and kicking it away.

Nails as long and sharp as knives dug into the ground, leaving lengthy freshly-carved trails behind. Deadly intent seeping through grit teeth as she stumbled forward, bringing her weapons to bear, Satsuki glared at her recovering opponent, stepping protectively in front of Ryuuko. Ragyou charged, bounding across the plane in great zig-zagging strides in a matter of seconds. It leapt, mutilated fingers splayed and half-human jaw fully unhinged to let a spine-chilling roar.

"REARRRGH!"

In a flurry of limbs, they did combat, blades batted aside amid metallic screeching. Black slammed against white, the monstrous creature easily bowling its former daughter over and sending her skidding away with a powerful backhand. A tiger in its own right, it circled its downed opponent, snarling as it rushed at her blindside and pounced.

Satsuki moved.

Ryuuko screamed.

SHING!

"Urk-!"

Rivulets of red dribbled, its warmth slowly coating hands and soaking into the kamui's fibers below.

Red and blue locked onto each other, shock and terror flitting between both of them at the same time.

Straight through her heart rested Bakuzan Kouryuu, the coal-colored blade slickened with dripping blood that pooled, that cascaded over the silver mount the wakizashi bore. With narrowed eyes and the added strength of her weight, Satsuki leaned into her weapon, the sliver of black sliding further into rotting flesh. One heel propped itself onto the ground, then another, sleek legs pushing up a torso heaving with ill-concealed rage. With the strength of a thousand men, she lifted the beast overhead in the same manner she had done before with her true mother many weeks ago at the conclusion of the ill-fated festival, hurtling the writhing mass towards the arriving waters, where they leapt in tsunamic waves to receive their prey and devour it whole with a single snap of mighty jaws.

Satsuki watched with no small amount of satisfaction as Ragyou clawed beneath, visibly struggling for purchase within the oblique thing's mighty pull and yet failing miserably. A rainbow-framed head broke its surface, grasping hands wobbling and straining to bring the rest of the body to bear. Hands trembled. Weak growls escaped the mass.

It fell.

With a pained howl, Ragyou was banished from the realm, waters rippling with satisfaction before receding into the growing darkness.

Ryuuko clung to Satsuki's leg as more burbled cries escaped the retreating dark waters, hesitantly backing away when the latter knelt down to meet her once more. She touched her, just to be sure she was real. Like peeling paint, ugly cracks had formed on Ryuuko's body from the earlier assault as if she were made of broken porcelain, toxic purple flashing to the rapid beat of her heart, the color and fissures growing more intense with every pulse.

Ryuuko wriggled animatedly at her touch, squirming all the more when the elder carefully held her in place and inspected the damage with critical eyes. And yet, she persevered anyway, her struggling movements intensifying the longer she remained. Slowly, reluctantly, Satsuki let go of the small child, watching her painfully shift her weight onto her feet.

A tiny hand slipped into hers, and the elder grasped it, surrounding fleeting warmth with her own. And so they journeyed, the former half-running-half-crawling with the heiress following closely behind by insistent tugs until they reached the far end of the void. Nothing but a large pool of water lay before them, its surface shimmering in winks of color.

Ryuuko looked uncertain then, apprehension briefly flitting across her face as she slid her hand from her sister's and started to cross the small pond in short hops. And just as her foot hovered over the crystal-clear liquid, stones appeared from their depths, appearing one after the other as they ferried her across the gap.

Like magic, a great island sprouted in the middle of the waters. Dirt sprayed in all directions as walls of glass and brick rose, pointed roofs breaching the vast emptiness around it. Satsuki puzzled as the earth rumbled to a stop and settled once more, brows knitting in consternation as to *why* this place seemed so familiar. Belatedly, realization hit her like the weight of a falling sack of bricks, and she looked upon it once more with pity-laced understanding.

It was the Matoi manor as it were before the great fire, before the assassination that set the red-streaked delinquent on par for her destiny's course.

Ryuuko's home, if it could even be called that.

Satsuki glanced at the mansion with a slight frown, noting the lack of entrances to permit any kind of access at all.

"There?"

A pause, then a single decisive nod in affirmation. The tiny girl half-turned around, pointing at the brick surface that lay behind.

"Inside?"

Ryuuko mutely bobbed her head, shuffling forward and reaching out towards the glittering ethereal building, a tiny palm brushing against the smooth wall's surface.

And just like that, a grand set of doors appeared before her, sending the small girl stumbling back in surprise. Its wooden-looking body was primarily white, with gold and light blue trim accentuating debossed designs littered with flourished streaks on the borders. Small strips of 'paint' were separating from the surface in jagged lines, revealing a dark midnight blue and red color scheme underneath.

Carefully, Ryuuko reached out to touch it, as if afraid it would shatter under her mere touch. Fingers tentatively brushed against the textured surface, and the rectangular lines etched on Ryuuko's body glowed a faint pink. Wind rushed forth from the opening doors, catching carved patches of fragmenting skin and raising them upward ever so slightly at their corners. As Satsuki watched, flakes began to detach from her and lift into the sky, where they disintegrated in black wisps that eventually faded away too.

"It's me..." the dream-Ryuuko uttered, backing away from the moving images as they poured out the door and filed past her like soldiers in an army, ghosts of the past that haunted, that lingered far too long in the realm between life and death, unable to accept their demise and unwilling to move on.

"Ryuuko!" Satsuki half-shouted in alarm, legs a blur of black and red flying across the raised-stone path when Ryuuko started to *burn*, miniscule wisps of flame eating away at the edges, turning them brittle and ashen.

The young girl paid neither Satsuki nor her desperate cries any mind, raising a disintegrating arm and stretching it towards the snaking streams. Everything and yet nothing flashed before her. Wetness gathered in her eyes, now pained with great sorrow at what she saw, what she *felt* as phantoms passed through her, sending nerves aflame with memories buried and raw. A solitary tear snaked down her cheek even as her upper half started to fully disappear as well.

"It's..."

The teardrop pooled on her chin, glistening dully in the light.

Then, she was gone, and all that was left was the sound of a droplet hitting the floor.

Satsuki screeched to a halt right where Ryuuko had stood, watching the crumbling flakes disappear in the air like smoking incense in intangible wind, a prayer carried on to ancestors long passed. Oddly enough, she swore she could have heard a “me” sighed in utter resignation before it too was snatched away by the breeze.

She looked up, noting the doors were fully opened to welcome her inside. Beyond the entranceway lay a void of white so very alike the one she had encountered during her unplanned arrival. However, the voices were distinct, as were the feelings that seemed to bleed with the constant stream of ethereal ghost-beings.

She took a steadying breath, heels clicking softly against the ground as she backed up -
- and charged right in, heedless of what lay ahead.

The quiet chanting of the choir buzzed the air, a monotone hum that filled her ears to be periodically broken by the powerful ringing of bronze church bells. She felt them, knew they were here, in the sacred space she so treasured. That they were close, and drawing ever nearer.

She glanced askance at the altar, at the generous amounts of flower petals that seemed to litter everything, at the one that stood by her side, gently parting her hair and brushing the tender skin that lay around her ear.

THUMP

Alarmed, bright blue eyes widened in shock, great tremors wracking her body in fear.

“They’re... here...”

A voice whispered - her own, yet not quite so.

Don’t let them in.

You don’t need them.

They’re going to take you away. They’re going to steal what’s rightfully yours, what you’ve fought and suffered for. They want you for their own selfish purposes. They don’t care about you at all, or what you want.

They're going to steal your happiness.

The pounding grew more intense, doorknobs rattling as something jostled it, throwing their weight against the polished wood. She shuddered, tightly squeezing her eyes shut.

Don't let them in, don't let them in.

Don't let them-

THUMP!

The world spun around her, taking on a sepia hue as it overlaid the bright and sunny surroundings. The very sky of the void itself seemed to peel away as well, reforming and reshaping with mighty trembles and thunderous bangs.

Her insides churned unhappily. When the world stopped, she found her line of vision to be no more than the knee height of an adult. Looking down, she found that she was no longer wearing a kamui. Rather, the same clothes the tiny Ryuuko she held took Senketsu's place - the exact same red blouse, white skirt, and the ratty pair of sneakers. And with a feeling that unlike the sensation of a hand squeezing her heart, she felt distress for some reason, even though it didn't quite wholly belong to her.

“Senketsu,” she shouted, head swiveling in confusion, “Senketsu, where are you?”

That is, that is what she *would* have said, had her lips parted to allow winged words to carry her voice to the god robe himself. Her panic was soon superseded by a deeper fear, one that sent her mind at edge and pushed her to the brink of tears. A vision of fluttering cloth, of a textured lab coat and a hunchback man, of cracked wooden getas and a similarly aged cane. All bobbing out of view in unhurried, untroubled steps without so much as looking back no matter how hard she cried his name.

Why did dad leave her here? Why didn't he say goodbye? Did he... not love her anymore?

She knew that he was always brisk in his interactions of late, but she thought it was because those mean people at the lab were intentionally keeping him late so he couldn't spend any time with her.

Was it because of... her?

“Was... it... me?”

It was at this point that Satsuki realized that she and Ryuuko were one and the same at this point. Their minds were melded, albeit completely unintentionally, which made everything so

much more real. She was looking at the world through Ryuuko's eyes, feeling every stab of anger and hurt and frustration and she had long ago. While she wasn't sure if Senketsu was joining the experience, the thought was soon pushed out of the forefront.

That explained it.

It was her fault that he left her. It was her fault why nobody liked her or wanted to be around her. All her fault. All her -

“Orphan,” a kid no more than six years of age hissed behind her back when the school administrators that welcomed her here were no longer within earshot.

“Freak,” a girl with dark hair in twin pigtails added, snickering derisively with her friend.

Satsuki felt Ryuuko's body tense, and her mouth open to refute the accusations that her parents never loved her. Still the accusations came, each one crueler and laced with more venom than the last. She felt the muscles along Ryuuko's arm flex reflexively with the last bit of resistance and then slacken with a crushingly overwhelming sense of despair and quiet forlorn acceptance.

Satsuki frowned as she felt “her” arm move, a curious feeling pickling along its length. Startled, she looked closer and noticed smeared crystal trailing down the length of the appendage. A fist that shook in repressed anger relaxed. A move that would have become a punch turned towards the busy task of wiping her eyes free of the stinging salt water.

She didn't even realize she was crying.

Days and nights blended together. Faces remained indistinct. She touched no one, and no one touched her save for the common violent bouts of fighting. Only when they lay defeated at her feet, doubled over in submission that she obliged them and left their presence. Life ran by her like water in a stream over smoothed moonstones. Alive, and yet not quite so at the same time. She drifted through society easily, passing through like a wandering ghost. Years passed. Seasons changed. But through it all, one theme remained- a cold and bitter loneliness that pervaded the atmosphere and irrevocably stained the memories.

Alone and friendless for well over her waking years, Ryuuko grew, trusting nobody but herself to help or fend for her life. A body that should have been soft and unused to the harshness of the world grew well defined and muscled far before its time, honed into a weapon meant for quickly and sloppily engaging in rules-free, no holds barred fights. Mushy hands grew hard and developed for knocking other people's teeth out with mechanical efficiency. A childhood that should have been relatively happy and carefree was littered with countless incidences of picking fights with her peers over the slightest of insults.

She hadn't even seen her father for a decade after she was left to this mediocre entitlement of a childhood, instead having contact be regulated to short, hastily written snippets and the occasional care package of clothing and money.

‘That would make the both of us, then,’ Satsuki mused bitterly, feeling stabbing pangs long-repressed strike harshly within her own heart.

And Ryuuko grew older. The simmering anger that had fueled her body for the better part of ten years cooled to a numbed state of apathy and boredom. Countless battles in underground fight clubs and her oft-known status as a delinquent preceded her well before she entered neighboring towns and cities. Even the infamous biker gang, the bosozoku, had rejected her hot-blooded temperament, her stubborn will and challenging views. People she had never met or seen before avoided looking her in the eyes and crossed the streets when they caught sight of her, knowing only her status as the “Guitar Case Drifter” and the “Kanto Wanderer” - a devil in disguise with the sharp tongue, attitude, and a brutal jab to match and never as the lonely girl she was.

Satsuki internally frowned. This definitely wasn't the life she imagined her younger sister would have, had she grown up beside her. Maybe if Ragyou hadn't casually tossed her away, they would have ruled over Honnouji side by side, and maybe even confided to each other their secrets and shared their comfort upon being subjected to their shared mother's predatory whims. And even though Satsuki knew instinctively that what she saw and felt and thought weren't hers, it didn't stop a sharp stab of pity from lancing her heart, from clouding her mind with 'useless' regrets.

The rest of Ryuuko's life passed by without incident. Satsuki elected to remain quiet, even as she saw the death of the person she knew as her father and the fiery aftermath. Not even a single muscle twitched as she watched Ryuuko help bury the remains of their father in a freshly dug grave that the latter herself had created and crudely inscribed an epitaph upon a stone with the few metal-working tools that were spared the fire's wrath. She didn't move even as she felt the crushing blows she herself had given Ryuuko through the latter's memory during their first fight, nor when she felt Ryuuko fly into a berserker rage and transform into a snarling bloodthirsty maniac. A thinly veiled broiling anger that did not quite belong to her burned painfully in her stomach. Seething contempt made its home there, and it festered within, rising whenever even the mere mention of the student council was made and spiking to the heavens when they met in combat or even were in close proximity to each other.

Then, absolute paralyzing shock came as she learned about her true origins and her relationship between her and the president she had fought against for so long. Dismay and denial of her lineage, even when it was held before her eyes in the form of her own throbbing heart. Absolute disgust and stomach-churning revilement at the revelation of her true nature, of her hybrid status and the unholy infusion of alien life to her own. Confusion that reigned over her once more, tormenting her endlessly, doubts over how many people knew about everything about her and yet elected to toy with her instead for their own amusement.

And above all, fear.

Fear that she was no longer good enough - not good enough in life to be taken care of by the sole person that was supposed to raise and nurture her or to be even thought about, even in passing. Not good enough to achieve more than a barely-passing grade year after year, no matter how hard she tried and how long she studied. Not good enough to be an adoptive sister to the first and only person she met to have even given more than a passing glance or a dismissive comment to her in her life. Not good enough to be a protector of the weak rather than a dominator over them in order to prove something. Not worthy of the attentions and love given to her by those nearest and dearest to her. Not needed. Not human.

Flitting images of endless nightmares, of passing countrysides on a purple motorbike and a whirlwind battle against the ever cunning seamstress flew by, and she was eventually given two splitting images of Junketsu's "courtship" of Ryuuko.

One was the actual binding process through Ryuuko's point of view and the other mental personification- the battle of wills between hybrid and kamui as the latter sought to fully dominate the former in mind and heart, to corrupt and twist its victim into the antithesis of what she stood for. Few people had the displeasure of having the Grand Couturier herself touch them with her bare skin, Satsuki herself included, and none other had the "blessing" bestowed upon them. Ryuuko had the especially unfortunate incident with being sewn into her clothing, torn between focusing on what essentially consisted of most of her family- life fiber blends that surrounded her as she was being worn by the rabid god robe- or the god robe itself and its attempts to control her. A tautness in her heating core tensed struggling limbs, electric pleasure racing down her spine while constricting ribs forced her to gasp for air, to lose focus and sway her mind away from the high-stakes battle playing out before her. It buzzed jittering nerves, rolling and roiling within the more the kamui latched on, the more the devil-woman's invading touches violated, driving home the inevitable culmination of their devious work amidst their ensnared victim's whimpered cries for help.

Then the scene changed, and although she could see the two standing next to each other, her vision led to a grey-washed parade of more images. At first, she was confused over the conflicting juxtaposition of the memories she had just seen, and the ones playing now. Then, all was made clear upon Ragyou's introduction. Disgust roiled in her stomach at just how much that rainbow-haired devil had inserted herself into Ryuuko's life. More "memories" passed, each one centering upon Ragyou and nothing but. In fact, Ryuuko's personification had presented herself as completely changing based on what the conniving, treacherous eel wanted, all to the tune of doing whatever pleased her the most. A happy child, a studious student, a faithful bride - all were fair game.

At first, "Ryuuko" had resisted, snarling quite loudly and using her nails to scratch anywhere on the kamui mirage she could reach after finding that her scissor blade was nowhere in sight and she could not escape the room. Wild and untamed, it was only fitting that she fought as such right to the bitter end. At one point, she had managed to bite the kamui's personification after it had knocked away a devastating punch and tried to pin her arms to her sides, and twisted its arm to its near-breaking point. Then, threads materialized around them with the sudden appearance of the Grand Couturier and drew both of them even closer- one heel-dragging pull after another. And soon, her struggles became few and far in between until she no longer reacted to Junketsu's encroachment or touches. And in that moment, her fierce expression of hatred was replaced by complacency, an absent-minded gaze with a thousand-yard stare off into the distance - the quiet soul-broken appearance of tearful forced submission.

He dressed her in a wedding dress that snugly fit over her upper torso and blossomed out below like blooming flower petals. Next to come on was the elegant train which she willingly accepted with a small neck dip, the delicate sheer fabric cascading down the aisle and draping over the gown's fine folds like waterfalls. Finally, he wrapped a fine gold necklace around her throat and fitted a crown of sorts over her head - a collar of absolute ownership and a gilded cage to trap her mind in. It was a plain one of similar coloring to the necklace, one that

began as a slim half-circle with two protruding spines on either side and had five rounded bejeweled spikes decorating its center. In a way, it resembled the small clips that both of them had worn while wearing the dormant white kamui. Her expression became calm and dreamy, so unlike the mask of frothing rage she had donned just mere seconds ago.

A great sadness overcame Satsuki when she realized that at this point, Ryuuko was completely and irrevocably broken. The fire that fueled her desire and will was all but put out, the embers of what used to be a roaring flame now struggling for life. The warrior she later came to know as her sister was merely a shell of her former self, stripped of everything but her clothes. To force her to bend to its will, the kamui had intentionally exposed her to every traumatic event in her life several times over, repeating them in an endless loop until every single one of them burned into her mind in disgustingly clear detail. A barrage of falsified memories then followed- lives where she was a homeless vagrant constantly near death, one with her father as an abusive manipulating beast of a man, and yet another where she was trapped in a living death, a life she constantly tried to flee - a world where people thought her something less than the miserable wretched creatures that prowled the streets at night for food scraps - but couldn't. The kamui then offered a false refuge by revealing a so-called escape to a world where she was loved, where everyone valued her instead of treating her like the trash they ascribed her to be and offered praise and a feeling of security, of belonging. And she had taken it all too willingly- hook, line, and sinker. Mad and distressed, she had ceded all voluntary bodily control just to make it stop.

A great forgotten rage compiled over years of solitary life boiled within her heart, and Junketsu fed on it like a leech, reveling in her despair and using it to blind her for its own purposes. The forged memories had served to confuse her beyond measure. Oily promises of great power and sickeningly sweet love-whispers of finally being accepted by the world at large had corrupted her mind, and the burning desire to finally be *loved* by a family - a real, *blood*-family - had been all but her downfall.

Discomfort stewed within her, although she dared not show it.

The god robe was right, it seemed. It fractured the warrior's mind, splitting it in pieces to perpetually be stuck floating in a void, standing at an altar, and carrying out the fibers' will as its loyal puppet all at once. And when Ragyou's false memories were unmasked as the treacheries they were, it wove memories anew, dynamically changing it as it saw fit to keep its host complacent under its control, furious and blinded by rage enough to not realize what she was wearing. Gloating about how it used its host's fragile mental state to its own advantage, it used the surge of power the kamui and Ragyou's absorption provided to overthrow its ruler.

Satsuki's eyes narrowed, her grip on her blades tightening until muscles corded, knuckles flared white in righteous anger.

She'd seen enough.

Heat gathering in her being, she roared, limbs blurring as she reached out, slashing and stabbing, face set in stone-cold fury. And as she did, they became like cloth scraps, fluttering to the ground like swan wings, loosened feathers that danced patterns and carved invisible trails as they fell.

A bright flash overpowered her vision, a small orb of bluish light originating from above her heart that shot out in all directions, seemingly expanding to fill the boundary-less room in a burst of crackling electricity and sound.

And just like that, the fog dissipated, leaving her stranded in the middle of a seemingly-endless field with nothing but a single small white building sitting beside a grove. Stunned, Satsuki swiveled her head, surprised at the sudden change of scenery more so than the silent re-appearance of her threaded ally. Acute senses buzzed at the rear of her mind, warning her of a possible oncoming threat, screaming at her to act, to *move*. And indeed, a figure appeared in the distance, seemingly strolling towards her at a leisurely pace.

Lips set in a grimace, she raised her blades again, prepared to attack and gore this new intruder. But then, just as she was about to shout loud her warning, the edges sharpened, and their identity was revealed to her. Startled, she lowered them, tentatively calling out a “Mako!?”

The blip of white and black bobbed excitedly in the distance. “Lady Satsuki!”

Grass swayed, tickling the sides of her feet as she ran. Her spiked geta lightly padded on the ground, chunks of dirt flying in the air as the brunette practically bounded over to her.

“I can’t believe I found you and Senketsu!” she blurted out. “You won’t believe it! I was wandering in this forest, when all of a sudden, I saw Ryuuko-chan swinging from a tree, and then I came closer, and then everything started to go - ” more than a generous amount of spittle decorated the heiress’ face as limbs were aimlessly flailed and sound effects demonstrated. “ - and then when I came out, I saw her in front of a - ”

A raised hand stopped her in her tracks, as did another that wiped the overabundance of saliva away.

“You saw Ryuuko!?” Satsuki questioned, the familiar authoritative tone oft used in her time as a dictator creeping into her voice like ice, causing the younger to visibly swallow. “Did she lead you to a mansion in the middle of a pond, where - ”

“Ryuuko?” Mako cocked her head inquisitively, genuinely puzzled at the sight of the frazzled president before snapping back into her joyful, exuberant self. “Nope! I just woke up over there in a field of flowers!” A thumb jabbed out to the valley far behind her. “I - ”

A gentle hiss, and the peaceful field started to dissolve at its edges, licks of passing violet flames slowly burning it away.

Ssssssssss...

“Kommen sie mit... Ihr werdet sterben mit mir...”

They all saw it, the way that the very temperature in the air seemed to have dropped by more than a couple degrees in an instant, the way the skies seemed to darken and become mottled with heavy clouds. The way the land became barren and desolate, trees instantly shedding

their leaves and withering away. The way the very world seemed to shudder in disgust at its presence.

“We must go,” Satsuki ordered, and Mako swiftly nodded in agreement.

Together, they ran side by side as equals, charging for the last safe haven in this world, the only place where Ryuuko surely was, with the blood-freezing chill of their enemy right behind and death breathing its moldering breath at their backs. For surely the monster that was Ragyou and not quite Ragyou had somehow managed to poison that which sought to destroy it, twisting it like its vessel had done so to many others in her lifespan, and took it over for its own use. And their hearts beat as one, their goal of freeing the person that mattered most to them so tantalizingly close.

The chapel.

The unholy infusion of hybrid and rot bore down on them, seeking to consume all now that the fleeting chance at rebirth was stolen away. Its massive hunger wiped away what stood before it, the land tearing itself asunder with chunks floating in the sky as it drew ever closer. Ragyou-who-was-not-Ragyou surged forward, grossly mutilated body still burning away in agonizing bursts of pain.

“Deine ende ist nahe... Freue dich...”

One blow impacted against the church doors, shaking the heavy maple in its frames. And another. And another. And yet, it refused to open, stubbornly remaining sealed no matter how brutally Mako beat at it with adorned fists and spiked bat. Wood cracked and groaned, but did not yield.

“It’s locked!” Mako panicked, rattling the doorknobs.

Satsuki grit her teeth and slammed against the doors with her shoulders, feeling the wood splinter explosively with every ram. All the while, she could feel Ragyou’s presence growing nearer with every passing second. Black tendrils streaked with a putrid yellow color licked at the edges of the near landscape and at their heels, soon smothering the scenery entirely.

“Get back,” she ordered, raising a foot and bringing it to bear as the girl squeaked and ducked behind her.

The front stomp connected. The double doors flew off their hinges and tumbled, coming to a rest upon the richly carpeted aisle, one partially draping over wooden pews.

Both Ryuuko and her “groom” looked surprised at the sudden interruption, turning to face them with a positively aghast look on the former’s face. The latter deceptively appeared alike a harmless mannequin, but the ominous aura hanging about it proved it to be anything but. Its face is covered in glimmering red threads, its being a shell, a perfect copy of a dream-husband. And as the seconds ticked by, it *became*, growing more real, more fleshed out, with defining features being slowly carved into its being, dissolving generic shapes and doing away with the bland lifeless features. White hair, white tuxedo, white gloves seemed to sprout from its skin. Fairly tall and slim, piercing red irises that seem to bore straight into

souls pointedly stared at them, an arm possessively wrapped around the shorter newlywed's waist. They are tightly embraced with strands of life fibers hanging loosely about them, threaded tightly around their fingers and draped over their arms. In fact, the entire chapel was covered in them. Fibers spilled out of every nook and cranny as far as the eye could see, snaking through the lanterns and plastering the empty pews below, covering painted walls and drawing decorations on hair-thin carpeting, where they seemed to lie in wait like coiled pythons. Far from spartan, the chapel was richly furnished in colors of white and gold, with tapestries hanging from the walls, detailed paintings of thread-like beings plastered upon every inch of the ceiling, and statues of men and women in draping robes. And above it all, perched over the wedded couple's heads at the ceiling's apex, a stained glass window commemorating the moment.

Frowning, the bride stretched a hand towards them, doors seemingly rewinding through time and flying back into their original position at the chapel's rear with rattling thumps, shutting out the roaring maw of destruction that hungrily waited outside. Heavy metal sliding into place and the steady *kerchunk* of falling tumblers ensured a complete lockdown- no way in, no way out. Undeterred, Mako marched right up to the church's front angrily, taking no heed of the way the very *world* seemed to rise in agitation at their very presence, lifting a bronze knuckle-clad hand and firmly dealing the groom a bone-shattering uppercut. The groom-thing rose, but the no-star cut it short with one powerful overhead swing of her bat, dealing out several more as insurance. Furious, she tossed her weapon aside and turned to the red-tufted girl, batting vibrant threads out of her way before gripping bare shoulders intently, shaking her vigorously enough for the golden band perched atop her skull to be loosened, if ever so slightly. A flash of scarlet winked across her vision, a hair-thin trail ending in a loop around the bride's finger, but the brunette paid it no mind.

"Ryuuko-chan, we're here to bring you home!"

"..."

"Ryuuko!" Senketsu shouted desperately, eyes fixed upon her and body straining against Satsuki's form when she failed to respond.

Ryuuko continued to say nothing, neatly groomed bangs overshadowing her expression. From the war-weary expression drawing gaunt lines on her face to the faint tremors that ran from her head to the tips of her toes, every inch of her radiated concealed exhaustion and hostility. Then, before any of them could react, a slash of red sent them leaping back to safety. Drawn from the depths of her wedding gown, the second - the favored - scissor sword was produced, tip firmly pointed towards them and dangerously close for either of the rescuing trio's comfort. Missing its geminal twin, it gleamed menacingly in the gray-washed background, patterns of color sliding across its broad side when the stained window cast its light upon it. Her face, now devoid of any fettered sense of calm that seemed present mere seconds ago, blazed with unparalleled rage.

"I'll kill anyone that dare ruins my happiness," she growled, viciously bloodthirsty expression not changing in the slightest when Mako swatted the sword to the side and resolutely stared nose-to-nose with her best friend. "No matter who they are!"

“This isn’t happiness, not even close! This is all fake, fake! This isn’t *you* , Ryuuko-chan, and I know it!”

Something akin to a murderous gleam flashed in gear-pupiled eyes.

“Shut your mouth,” Ryuuko snarled back, whipping the scissor blade back and using its hilt to smack the no-star away - a movement that proved useless when she latched back on to her, wrapping her arms and legs around her head. “Get out... I’ll kill you...” Nervous apprehension mated with indignant fury ran through her body like electric currents, reflected in the subtle tremor that took residence in her voice. “I’ll... I’ll kill you all!”

“Snap out of it, Ryuuko!” Satsuki and Senketsu shouted in unity, irises of asphalt paired with setting suns intently staring at twin beetle-blue depths. “Snap! Out! Of! It!”

Hands clapped over ears, a veiled swath of navy stubbornly swished from side to side, a horse nodding off a persistent fly. “Shut up! Shut up, shut up, **shut up!**”

She lashed out blindly, an arc of screaming scarlet issuing forth from the grinded edge and cleaving into chapel walls, barely clipping the head of the clinging brunette so fiercely latched onto her.

“Dummy, dummy, dummy!” Mako shouted, barely restrained tears twinkling at the corners of her eye. Forcefully relinquishing her grip and pushing the ill-met bride away, she screamed with sharp stabs of pain beating against her heart, “Fine, go ahead and kill me!”

"Mako!" Senketsu roared in terror, the brunette standing resolute, unmoving, paying no heed to his cries.

"Mako," Satsuki added warningly, "Don't -"

"Kill me, if you're so intent on being cooped up in here!" the no-star unflinchingly roared over the duo, "Kill me and give up on being my Ryuuko!"

“Fine, then! I will!” the newlywed snarled back, hefting the slender red weapon overhead once more, a sick shine gleaming off the wickedly curved blade.

A scissor-shaped shadow fell over the altar.

The scissor blade trembled.

And yet did not fall.

The brunette blinked, heart panging painfully at the sight. Her zealously determined expression melted away, adrenaline-borne bravado replaced by a medley of sympathy and pity. The bride’s face is twisted, screwed with choked emotions she could not truly define. In her mind, the voices have returned again, with a sickly sweet version of her own shouting at

her to rend flesh, to spill blood and reduce that which stood before her into scraps. But in rapid pulses, her heart screams back, defiantly protesting and ordering that she protect them instead.

“No... I don’t want... I want...” Ryuuko managed to sputter in her confusion, tears messily collecting in her bright blue eyes and falling onto the frilly dress below. "...I want... I..."

Mako tackled her then, arms wrapping around the bride's slender waist, cap knocked askew and moistening face buried stubbornly in the white gown's fine material, the other much too conflicted to even fathom attacking. Close together like this, they could easily feel the tiniest of movements the other made - every twitch, every quivering breath of air.

And for a moment, all was still.

“Ryuuko. Come back with us,” Satsuki softly said, comfortingly reaching out a hand and lightly rubbing a palm against the bared flesh of the brainwashed girl’s arm.

As if snapping out of a trance, Ryuuko jerked away. Half-stumbling over the expansive train that pooled at her feet and swatting the coconut-haired girl away with a vicious motion, she shrieks her defiance. Her expression is feral once more, fangs catching lips and easily drawing blood that pooled, that dripped past her chin.

“No! I don’t **care** if it’s fake, I want my happiness, I want to be alone! Why won’t you leave me alone!?”

Metallic clicks shook the air as the sword elongated, its length ominously towering over the quartet.

She swung the sword down with all her might, intending on cleaving through all three in one fell swoop.

TSING!

Heels clicked, a pair of red stilettos instantly rushing forward, protectively stepping before the recovering no-star. Black locked against red, sparks flitting as blades screeched. They shivered, the half scissor stuttering against the wakizashi about the edges, coming ever closer with every rocking motion they made, a scarlet tip drawing closer to a vulnerable forehead, millimeters away from a glaring eye of ice and water, until -

The sword slid past its rival, knocking the rest of the black length aside and grazing past the Bakuzan half’s metallic guard with a quiet *swish*. Satsuki's eyes widened. She recalculated, Gako already en-route to parry, to intercept. But she was only human, and no matter how hard she tried, she just wasn't fast enough. The bladed end approached her, twisting about the air...

SLASH!

Blood sprayed the four in a fine mist, fully coating the group with the sticky liquid in a matter of seconds...

... and impacted the ground below with a thunderous crash, burying itself deep into patterned stone and sending shards flying amidst a cloud of murky gray. For a few heavy moments, nobody moved. Mako, Satsuki, and Senketsu stood frozen where they were, gaping at the scene with widened eyes and choked attempts at speech, eyes twitching and mind racing, attempting to make sense of what just happened.

A small, fragile voice not unlike the delicate tinkling of wind chimes whispered, "...Why won't you leave me alone?"

The wedding dress, so painstakingly sewn into her form, was absolutely ruined. A jagged, roughly hewn canyon was cleaved down the dress' middle and carved into supple flesh by the bride's own hand in an eerie mirror of Shinra Kouketsu's undoing. Reddened strips of white surrounded the ripped cloth, and blood richly soaked the finely embroidered fabric, with more seeping into the mannequin-groom lying prostrate on the ground below.

Ryuuko sunk to her knees, hunched over with painstakingly combed bangs overshadowing moistening eyes. In gloved hands, the plunged blade's oblique handle was tightly clenched, a sliver of red firmly dug perpendicular to the ground with the deceptively sharp end facing the bride. The curved handle was soon relinquished, traded for wads of the expertly tailored material gathered around ruined flooring. Liquid pattered softly on the fine threads, diluted ruby wicking off cloth and sweeping away in crystal clear rivulets. And slowly, painfully, she raised those same ichor-splattered hands and wrapped shaking fingers around the feather-soft sweetheart neckline's top and pulled. And pulled. And pulled until the shriek of shearing fibers filled the silence and the tear ran down the ruined cloth like the river flow, only stopping when the gown was fully rent in two. And soundless, the halves of the dress slipped off her deathly-still torso and collapsed around her kneeled form in a formless heap, doffed silken elbow-length gloves and expensive white heels joining them soon afterward in listless tosses. The necklace was gripped in unsteady fingers, jerky movements of her tugging leaving raw, reddening marks on soft peachy flesh before the dainty golden chain snapped free. Last to go was the jagged crown adorning her head, the decorated headpiece seamlessly joined with an embroidered veil emotionlessly ripped off its crown of perfectly groomed hair and left to hollowly clatter onto the altar below.

She stared blankly at the scene, once again naked as the day she was born into a world of chaos and inequality, shoved into a fate, and packaged as the ultimate weapon to be used in either mankind's survival or destruction. And slowly, the church started the melt around them. Candles were blown out by an intangible wind. Windows shattered. Tapestries unwound, statues crumbled into powdered plaster, and paintings peeled off where they lay, leaving the chapel barren and lifeless once more.

And when all lay still and quiet once again, she slowly looked at her bloodied hands, then at her chest, where the gaping hole had yet to be fully sealed. A whimper. A snuffle. And then another. And then the dam came loose as the delinquent sobbed brokenly, wailing out her sorrows to the world at large. And Mako embraced her tenderly once more, dropping to her knees and worming her way into the broken bride's bent form and pressing against her heart, gently cupping red-stained hands with her own between their beating hearts.

With deep, shuddering breaths, the delinquent's body curled in on itself, onto Mako, the weight of the past and present far from a mere feather on her shoulders. Miserably, she cast a furtive glance about the room, noting the decadence's vanishment and the reversion of the handsome-faced groom into a threaded mannequin. Just like these newcomers had boldly claimed, this *wasn't* happiness at all; it was just a mere paper copy of it, a cookie-cutter canvas others had painted with their colors and slapped her within, all the while proclaiming it so.

But was it so bad if she wanted to pretend that it was real, that it did make her happy, if but for a while?

All these walls in her heart to lock her inside, but what does one do when one breaks them when they're not looking?

In the distance, a great sloshing drew nearer. Its shadow spilled over the shattered frames where glass used to inhabit. Wood groaned and splintered, bowing under the force. Liquid seeped in the cracks between door and threshold like waters in a sinking ship, snaking through the tile grooves to lap at their feet though neither of them paid it any attention.

Satsuki knelt as well, embracing the two in a loosely gripped, but well-meaning hug. Unfamiliar with the intimate action in practice as she was, any lingering apprehension was soon dispelled when she discovered her body neatly slotting with the other two, three heartbeats soon falling into cadence, an orchestra of warmth and sound that easily resounded throughout the space within.

And with a metallic *clang* that blew the doors wide open once again, a tsunami rushed in, knocking cracked pews aside and filling the entire building with its mass within seconds. And yet, neither of the four moved, instead clinging to each other that much more with expressions ranging from indifference to mortal terror.

The last thing either of them saw was a tsunami of a wave pouring in through the open doors. The black water took them under, and they knew no more.

道に迷いました

(I lost my way)

Chapter End Notes

Mako doesn't need to merge with Ryuuko; her incomprehensible comprehension of Ryuuko as a person makes her a natural at navigating through Ryuuko's mind, even in its highly corrupted state. Satsuki can't do that, as the scene where Satsuki admitted to learning about the true beauty of mankind/inferiority to Ryuuko in terms of methods employed in episode 22 hasn't happened here. This references my hypothesis that Ryuuko is the ultimate teacher in the series [many characters adopted her techniques (sound negation, using blood to blind enemies, etc.)].

Modified lyrics: "Propane Nightmares", by Pendulum.

Grounds for Divorce

Chapter Summary

Praise the anger...

Chapter Notes

Thanks for being so patient with me! Here's a 25+ thousand word update to make up for it. Yes, 25K+. Because this chapter is 7 (actually 13, going by when I first started writing this on Google Docs) months late.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

道を迷わないように

(*Don't Lose Your Way !*)

“Delta team, sitrep needed!”

The electric crackle of dead air. A hiss, then the chirp of an answering radio transceiver.

“Tango-alpha destroyed. Squad leader engaged with Tango-sigma, with neutralization successful. Reports Tango-sigma down and ready to reach the primary objective. On standby waiting for emergence of initial squadron- ”

Another chirp. “Negative! Delta team, get out of there, damn it! Repeat, exfil - ”

The rest of the feed dissolved into garbled noise, answering shouts of terror blotted out by all-encompassing white static. Gunpuku-clad nudists paused in their escape, feeling an unearthly blast of heat sear the air, one that came far from the reaches of the burning building. And all of a sudden, a pounding beneath their feet, one that rattled tree leaves free from their branches and shook even the mountains to their foundations.

A single collective thought shot through military personnel and civilians alike, one of fearful curiosity.

‘What the hell?’

The ground quaked. A wild, animalistic screech filled the air, a chorus of ethereal howls hungered and crazed. Clothing frenetically poured from the confines of the burning building seemingly without order, spilling forth in a fluttering wave. Some were set ablaze, others unmarred save for a heavy dusting of dirt and soot. But they all were attached at their backs by throbbing sets of fibers, all pulsing in time to an enormous, swollen heart.

Wailing a strange, high-pitched cry, they charged forth into the fray heedless of the jamming needles and coagulants the Nudists possessed, swarming the company completely and utterly without strategy. In a single collective action, they dove, a streak of white painted clear across gray pre-dawn skies. They whirled and twisted, trapping the scantily-clad guerrillas within a titanic tornado of hungry cloth that closed in, that tightened around their bare bodies like a noose.

Wielding tailor's daggers like machetes, the nudists hacked and slashed against the great woven wall, crying in dismay when three more took the place of every one they cut down.

"We're surrounded!"

"No shit!" The squad leader swore, teeth nervously grinding the insides of his lips to tattered shreds as he fingered a grenade's pin.

All around them were nothing but scantily adorned trees and snowy clearing, and they were out in the open. They could make a clear dash for the forest, but it would mean abandoning their Honnouji-based allies and opening them up to sneak attacks by lurking COVERS without a chance at aid arriving. Not that they had to worry about the heads in particular, that is - they went ahead and took on the greatest threat to mankind without batting an eye, after all. No, it was the depowered club leaders they had to look after, people with next to no actual combat experience in specifically dealing with clothing hell-bent on the complete extinction of humankind.

"Hold your positions!"

The naked soldiers pawed nervously at the ground, twitching as they fought against the instinctive urge to flee as the mindless, slobbering horde drew closer, their circling growing ever tighter, drawing close to unprotected flesh. And as if they had a sense of humor, silken sleeves lightly brushed against bare skin, mouths agape and emptied forms seeming to take perverse delight in watching their hunted quarry hastily leap away as if burned by the contact. Fresh magazines were loaded and slammed home, weapons reloaded within trembling hands. Bracing themselves, they stepped protectively in front of the naked students, aiming down their sights as the mass of clothing surrounded them.

"Oh... shit!"

One cursory check of their inventory set the rebels in new fits of swearing. Needle reserves were in the red and nearby reinforcements much too scattered by the Kiryuuin matriarch's fall to be of any use soon, their only hope would be that the officers' comm channel was still open and transmitting.

"Get ready! Close your eyes and cover your ears!"

With a collective cry, they reared up and streaked forward, seams split down the middle to reveal free-flowing fibers slowly drifting towards them, welcoming and pulling stranded prey within themselves.

“Fire in the hole!”

With a mighty wrench, the pin was pulled, and the flashbang thrown straight into the air. And within seconds, the world erupted in a thunderous explosion of sound that rattled teeth and shook bones, COVERS screeching and colliding and hastily flying away as the powerful burst of pressure slammed against their very threads.

Metal clicking and needle guns being brought up to bear, the squad moved back into formation, grimly tracking their disoriented quarry.

“Ready... FIRE!”

A ringing blast cracked metal and deafened ears, forcing all who stood nearby off their feet and skittering a ways away. From within a gaping wound, three figures emerged amid a rushing black tide like modern Greek gods, the tallest riding the waves to a graceful halt before her loyal generals and the others sliding to spread-eagle stops on their faces at her feet. Satsuki closes the remaining distance between the recovering elites, the four loyally stepping forward to meet her with apprehensive yet relieved expressions.

“How long were we out?”

“Not very long,” Houka replies, consulting his wrist-mounted PDA. “Approximately one minute and thirty to forty seconds, give or take. Matoi here was thrashing so violently that she nearly broke Toad’s arms when he tried to restrain her after that cage collapsed after absorbing you and Mankanshoku.”

Shocked cobalt widened imperceptibly, a glimmer of hope reflected within steely depths.

‘Ryuuko?’

Unconsciously, her lips whispered her name as well, a hacking cough answering her after a moment’s hesitation. She turned abruptly, a glorious cape of dark blue whirling with her to frame her surprised expression perfectly.

“Ryuuko!”

A haggard breath, the dribbling streak of red staining pointed teeth and crawling down her chin, pooling at shaking feet as she struggled to rise.

And...

She was alive. Eyes glazed, badly burnt in some places, and barely conscious - but still miraculously alive. Even the large gash that bared her for all the world to see was slowly drawing to a close, the last of the rushing tide reduced to a trickling stream that crawled forth from the mending wound, an incredible sight accentuated by gentle metallic plinks from spent bullets ejected from healing flesh. She stands panting, form bent over with one hand weakly grasping a walled accent for support and the other drawn protectively around her bare stomach. And with a wheeze, she lurched suddenly, odd rasping sounds escaping pitiful attempts at breathing. Accompanied by powerful jerky heaves, fanged jaws parted to allow nonexistent bile past.

Her entire body painfully seized, drawing tight around a spine suddenly curved the wrong way. Spasming uncontrollably, bobbing up and down, a body feebly fought against unstable legs to rise to almost its full height, one pained twitch at a time. Garnet rolls over to meet their expectant gazes, face gaunt, taut, and unnaturally pale, sweat dotting at a ghostly white hairline. Then, as soon as the tension fully possesses her, it vanishes, leaving her to sag and bend like melted wax.

She owlishly blinks at them once, twice, a soft sigh escaping her as lids slowly fluttered to a close.

Mako scrambles to her feet and rushes over without another word, threat of lingering possession forgotten and thoughts solely filled with her adoptive sister's wellbeing. Water parted before her great strides as great walls of blue and green, briefly lapping where missing ceiling lay before crashing back to earth. Both she and Senketsu manage to reach her just as her grip falters and her completely drained body careens towards earth, looping jacket and kamui-borne arms under a waiting pair of shoulders and thrusting their bodies beneath hers.

"Ryuuko!" Senketsu shouts in relief, quickly hushing when she startles awake and weakly cups her closest ear in agony instead. "Ryuuko, are you alright?"

"Are you kidding!? It hurts!" she hisses, flinching when the fight club president accidentally pressed up against a tender spot. "It fucking hurts!" She pushed off wetted tile suddenly, stubbornly freeing herself from their holds despite the jellied feeling rising in clumsy legs. "But that's what I get for being such a dumbass!"

A calloused hand reaches further up to rake matted strands, face screwed up in horror as stub-fingernail'd fingers brush up against a healing bullet exit wound. It withdraws hurriedly when fleshed walls start to close around questing digits, accidentally brushing against pairs of unnatural threaded limbs lining her spine in the process. Heart sinking in her chest at its feather-soft touch, she stops in her retreat and tentatively pulls at one by its base, wincing when a fresh jolt of pain racing through reddened flesh punishes her attempts.

"Oi, t'fuck is this?" Blinking, her eyes catch bone-like adornments just barely protruding from the sides of her hips, arched tri-pointed plates coated in drying blood glimmering dully in the dim lighting. "O-oi!"

Her probing hand is snatched up by another, similarly-scarred one, her sister gently but firmly holding it in her grip.

“Hey!” she shouted indignantly, digging her heels into the ground and fruitlessly attempting to pull away. “Let me go!”

A cobalt pair unwaveringly bore holes straight through her head, commanding her attention at once. “Calm yourself, Ryuuko.”

One last futile tug, and her body slackens in submission. Satsuki releases her grip, her sister’s audible sigh of irritation cut off when a warm and very welcome person pounces and wraps her arms around her in a steely hold, effortlessly bowling her over.

“M-Mako!? Hey, whoa!”

“Dummy!” Mako shouts, powerlessly beating against her bare chest and sobbing freely in barely-restrained joy.

A calloused hand makes its way over to her back, rubbing soothing circles at its base. “Hey, Mako. Hey, Mako, stop.” she gasped as her body winced viciously, twitching form hastily wrapping around hers to placate, to soothe, to remind her of her injured presence. “Hey, ow! That hurts!”

A brown mop of hair bobbed. Comically large tears pooled from painfully expressive eyes and spilled forth across reddened, snot-streaked cheeks. Mako sniffled miserably, form quaking when they finally met each other’s gazes.

“R...Ryuuko?”

“Yeah,” she paused, feeling a glowing sort of warmth thrum in her chest upon seeing her own gently smiling reflection, finally free of whatever hold was thrust upon her, bobbling within tearing eyes, “it’s me.”

Glass and marble crunched threateningly from above, and all looked above to the collapsed ceiling uncertainty, where the low hissing and sinister crackling of raging flames became louder.

“We must leave,” Gamagoori urged, eyeing the approaching flickering orange light with nervous apprehension.

Houka frowned, fingers dancing over keyboards, the red lenses of his regalia reflecting the endless stream of information scrolling within. “He’s right. The building’s coming down. By my calculations, the mansion’s structural supports will completely give way within twenty to thirty minutes, with the rest of the mansion coming down seconds afterward. The localized fires’ spreads from the earlier assaults are slower than projected given the size and general non-flammable composition of the rooms added with broken water lines suppressing its growth... we should still evacuate, however. Smoke toxicity will reach unbearable levels soon. Unable to clearly determine precisely *when*, however, given the circumstances.”

“And the original life fiber?” Tsumugu questioned disbelievingly. “We can’t just leave it here without confirming that it’s neutralized.”

Aikuro skeptically replied from his place beside the gunner, voice looping over the commset, scratchy and partially obscured by white static. “Should be incinerated as soon as this dump burns to the ground. I’d love to get my hands on it and destroy it myself, though. Make sure it’s all gone.”

The mohawked man grimaced, throwing his scoped rifle over a shoulder after slamming a fresh magazine home and flicking away the smoldering remains of a cigar into the grand bath’s putrid water.

“Burying it alive? Seems - ”

“Unlikely,” Satsuki cut in. “ *She* told me of the protective measures taken. The room it is housed in is protected by over two meters of layered reinforced concrete three to four stories underground. It was designed to withstand generations and attempted assaults by rivaling forces, surviving everything short of a constant barrage of ranged missiles or sustained bombing. Even the path to get there is mired in dead-end corridors, designed to trap invaders until they could be dealt with, or at least those without extensive knowledge of how the manor is laid out. The only thing that could possibly breach through naturally would be itself.”

Houka nodded his agreement, regalia buzzing with new sets of data as hundreds of every possible scenarios were dissected and executed in real time, probabilities calculated and analyzed in nanoseconds. “The Kiryuuin clan has been involved in guarding it for centuries, presumably since it cannot defend itself if such a threat to its life emerges before it was subjected to “activation” by the family head, or at least, its caretaker at the time. Perhaps this is the reason why Kiryuuins innately can ‘communicate’ with it once initiated as its guardians. Since Ragyou is now dead, Matoi has broken out of Junketsu’s hold, and Lady Satsuki was shown its location, it should be a simple matter of destroying it manually, perhaps by fire or,” he paused, giving a knowing look to the respective Kiryuuin sisters’ sword sets, “by other means.”

“Tch,” Ryuuko scoffed, rolling her neck and kneading a groping hand across aching shoulder tendons. “That’s what you guys think. Hate to break it to you, but it ain’t the dead ball of yarn you guys make it out to be. It’s alive.”

“Be that as it may, it’s never acted on its own before,” Satsuki countered, tossing back a scarlet blade to an outstretched hand. “Ragyou always had to manipulate it using physical gestures or cues for it to do anything, whether it was creating COVERS or moving them into place. *She* implied that because she had a bond with it as its penultimate guardian and caretaker, she was able to do more than command it with a thought to awaken when the time was right to cause humanity’s collapse. What she did at the Festival was - .”

“Yeah, well, it told me to go murder Rags and everything,” Ryuuko interrupted forcefully, a certain anxiety filling her body the longer they went talking about that *thing*.

Her bare feet scuffed the sullied flooring, nervous energy sending her body into high-alert as the life fibers within her seemed to perk up at the mention of that monster. It penetrated her skin, rooting deep in her bones and tethering itself to strained muscles, enveloping her in its unwelcome hold. Fingers twitched, the skin on her face suddenly feeling too itchy, too tight,

like something was crawling across it. Like she wanted to reach up and scratch there, scrape and grate at thin tissue until it broke and blood poured forth until even her very eyes were clawed from their sockets. Like nothing less than the grittiest of sandpaper and steel wool could fully scrub that disgusting sensation away. Teeth softly grinded, enamel tapping and scraping to an inaudible rhythm, hands clenching in intermittent spurts - all futile attempts to rid herself of such an invasive feeling. She didn't even notice that the conversation was going on without her until a mass of blue cloth and keyboards suddenly appeared square in her vision, startling her.

“- if you're ... is true... then... You mean, it is capable of strategizing!?”

“Wha- uh... yeah?” Ryuuko shook herself awake and stared blankly at the hacker. “I ah... It said to go and take her place by killing her. That I had something she didn't.”

“Fascinating! Human-like intelligence possibility developed in the span of weeks,” Inumuta murmured to himself, awed. “If the purpose of the COVERS were to feed it so that it could gain enough power to execute Ragyou's plan of using absolute domination to trigger the cocoon genesis... could it be that it also absorbed the intelligence of the humans to develop its own!?”

“We don't have time for this,” Satsuki cut in, a grave look etched upon her face. “We need to go. Now.”

She opened her mouth to respond, words instantly dying on her tongue and body stiffening as the restless fibers within grew even moreso, shifting uncomfortably underneath fragile flesh and spreading their hypersensitivity throughout her body like great shadowy claws. Her mind suddenly felt on edge. The rest of her body prickled as if she were covered in thousands of spiders at once, crawling and weaving their silken webs upon her.

The earth exploded beneath them then, rock shooting through ruined flooring in jagged shards. They leapt away in a single concerted motion, eyeing the emerging rock growth warily as giant fragments pushed through, soon towering over them and rivaling even the likes of the ruined mansion itself in height.

They shielded their faces, wincing as their eruption sprayed dirt and gravel. Satsuki moved, her wakizashi singing and cleaving particularly large chunks dangerously streaking close to the Nudist rebels in perfect halves. Immediately about whipping to face him, she shouted, “Inumuta!”

Rapid clacking presses answered in lieu of an immediate response, a rushed stew of words blurting forth as information scrawled past faster than he could read. “Geological topography and seismic activity don't suggest a natural event. Radar tracking life fiber bioenergy indicates a large mass thirteen meters underground and... counting? Lessening?” he frowned, irritably tapping inbuilt keys in concealed frustration. “Scanners suggest a large mass separating in two parts, one rapidly breaching the surface. Does it mean to escape by diverting our attentions and separating us...?”

The mansion heaved, localized earthquakes becoming stronger, more frequent.

Sanageyama sprang away as the rock beneath his feet crumbled. “...It’s actively burrowing deeper underground in an attempt to escape?”

Tsumugu swore, submachine guns unholstered from leg straps and gripped within white-knuckled hands at the ready. “Damn it! We should have split when that bitch was - ”

A horrendous shriek reminiscent of the COVERS orchestra cut him off, forcing the rebels to instinctively curl up with hands clasped around their heads as it grated against their ears, tearing at their very minds with reckless abandon.

"Kiryuuin."

Ryuuko instantly froze, mahogany irises shrinking to pinpricks at the sound of the well-known, oily-sounding voice that resonated with the very core of her fibered being, snaking into her mind and settling upon it with a pleased sigh. Satsuki flinches as well, sending bewildered looks about the room as it too washes over her, only distantly recognizing the spoken words through her tenuous synchronization with the black kamui.

“Ryuuko!” Senketsu screamed as all three of them suddenly quiver as the air suddenly becomes thick, choking, saturated with a presence so malevolent that even those not joined by the life fibers in any way could feel. His panicking increases as a medley of voices become louder and more frenzied, sending unadulterated fear shooting through his very fibers, “What’s wrong!?”

A sudden burst of sound and color sends her to her knees before she can do anything else, vision wavering and becoming tinged with saturated hues, brightening and darkening in intermittent intervals. Satsuki jerks away, no longer able to hear its words behind a thick curtain of static noise but able to sense its crushing phantom weight within her mind all the same.

“I... The primordial life fiber,” Ryuuko gritted out with clenched teeth, clasping her hands over her ears and shaking her head from side to side slowly as if seeking to dislodge its treacherous presence by the mere action alone. “I don’t... know... what’s going... - !?”

A startled cry tears free from cracked lips as a fiber-spear suddenly appears from behind and lodges itself firmly into her spine, individual threads instantly splitting off from the main body and seeping into hers like lightning’s branching bodies. She moves quickly, gripping it at its base and tearing it free with a strangled noise, hissing as agonizing pain races up and down injured flesh. But more and more rush past to take its place, easily evading her hasty assault by forcefully knocking the lone scissor blade out of her hand and sending it spinning uselessly away. The rebels jump to her defense with throaty screams and grating shrieks of metallic blades, but their attacks are similarly brought to nothing as a corded tendril swats them aside, defensively coiling and winding its body around its prey - an agitated snake of titanic proportions.

She fights, struggling against that which lanced her flesh, but no matter how hard she wills her body to move, it remains in its kneeling position, nerves deaf to her command. The sounds of battle behind her grow dimmer, exponentially paler in contrast to the fiber-god’s all-encompassing song as it washes over her mind once more.

"Your freedom from the she-Kiryuuin and your kamui's hold changes nothing. What do you hope to accomplish by assisting these humans?"

Her voice growls out, murderous intent dripping from parting enamel. "At the very least? Getting rid of you."

A scoff. *"Amusing. Try not to die so easily while doing so."*

"Yeah? Well, you just wait until I get these shits off. Then you'll see what humans are really made of."

"Hmph. How confident you seem to be, especially since you can't move your arms, much less scratch your nose."

She swore under her breath, conflict against her traitorous body renewed as a collectively snide laugh grated against her mind.

"Think about it. As long as these threads are lodged within, we control your body. It moves only when we will it. We can just make your body get up, walk over to the nearest of these walking blood-meals, and rip them apart even while you sleep - all without you waking up or even realizing what happened. All you'll know is that you woke up within a pool of blood to the sight of their dismembered bodies. Maybe we'll even start right now, with that girl over there that your bond-kamui promised to kill first before being so rudely interrupted. Perhaps we'll have you snap her legs with your knee and crush her head underneath your foot while she begs for your mercy. And the best part? There's no way you can stop us."

A ragged snarl. "Yes. There. Is!"

*"Oh? And how do you plan on doing that? Especially when we... can... do... **this.**"*

Without warning, an ominous hum filled the air, rattling caked dust from their resting place and sending all who heard it frantically clasp their ears for fear of being deafened. Ryuuko's arm suddenly turned against her, a hand whipping around and plunging darting fingers into her chest. Ribs snapped, lungs jumping within her chest at shattered bone lodged itself into delicate tissue. Her vision abruptly grayed out, darkened surroundings becoming notably fuzzier about the edges and narrow-sighted tunnel vision encompassing all that she saw. Shocked cries of "Ryuuko!", "Ryuuko-chan!", "Matoi!", and "transfer student!" reached her ears, but they were drowned out by a curious ringing that grated against her ears, feedback screeching unhappily like a microphone drawing too close to a speaker or nails clawing against an ancient chalkboard. Carefully pulling out that which it sought and gingerly rolling the bloodied organ around in her palms, Ryuuko scowls at the sight of its sparkling threaded being pulsing before her, eyes twitching against the instinctive need to shut out overwhelming stimuli, futility resisting against her very body as it became her prison once more.

"You remember when you destroyed the She-Kiryuuin, correct? Absorbed her being into your own after her death unleashed an impressive pulse of energy? One that your body quickly adapted to metabolize to prevent a destructive force comparable to that of the most powerful

of your explosive weaponry from annihilating your allies? Now imagine what would happen if we did the exact same thing, only. With. Your. Hand."

A thought dawned upon her then, and she smirked.

"Heh. Go right ahead then."

"Oh?" a small curl of the fingers around the organ, god-fiber sounding interested - entertained, even - as Ryuuko struggled to fight off the urge to **not** rise to her feet and personally try to murder that damned ball of used floss right then and there.

Her jaw clicked in irritation, enamel crunching softly as sharpened teeth ground against each other in slow, deliberate passes. "You claim to be able to control my body. You squeeze this heart and I die, and you're left with nobody to defend you. Because I ain't gonna be your puppet anymore."

The coolly spoken reply was immediate, almost dripping with infuriating smugness so typical of her other unfortunately-related family members.

"They'll never forgive you if you do."

"And you think I give a crap about that!?" Ryuuko bluffed, wincing as her hand squeezed her rapidly beating organ that much tighter, ignoring the instinctive need to cry out as sharp pains assaulted it. "If it means giving the world a chance at living without the life fibers, then I'll do it. They can take down the source of this batcrap crazy shit, and I'll be doing them a service by getting rid of a walking source of life fibers."

Silence.

And then, laughter, a guffawing so boisterous that it ricocheted off the walls in her brain and seemed to fill the room.

*"You forget that we are **one**, Kiryuuin. And we have learned many things about you in the short time you submitted to us. Your insubordination matters not in the short term; you are foolish to even think that we had not planned in case of your and the she-Kiryuuin's failure."*

Its crowing was suddenly cut short as a smudge of oxford crossed her vision, ducking low under broad sweeps of ochre and sliding past its snares on kamui-clad knees. A sliver of black whistled through the air, severing the lancing fibers with neat, efficient strikes. And with that, her body was given back control over itself, autonomy returned in a single decisive snap that sent her reeling back onto her butt in disorientation.

A hand cut through the air, a dismissive gesture that waved off the threat of its monologue even though she knew it couldn't see it. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I get it. I'm coming to kill you next."

A brief laugh, a derisive collective chuckle of thousands of lost souls.

"Come then, Kiryuuin. Come and face your destiny."

A toothy grimace played at the corners of her lips, the stubborn fire within reinvigorated, smoldering underneath a new kindling pyre.

“You just wait,” she growled back, panting as she heaved herself to her feet once more and rubbed her sore tailbone. “I’m coming for you.”

Narrowed garnet glowered at the sea of fibers as they swirled below her feet like eddying waters, brows furrowing in poorly-hidden rage as they slipped past to retreat underground once more, swaying mockingly before her eyes - a painful mirror of how Ragyou and Nui had goaded her into charging into Honnouji Academy just a short time ago. She moves forward, anger’s siren song blaring, ears reveling in its sound, intent on retrieving her blades just for the pleasure of stabbing them clean through its limbs, to methodically saw them off as it screamed and writhed in agony below. A heel clacked, the crisp noise jarring such visions and temporarily bringing order to the buzzing noise that possessed her.

“Move!” she growls when Satsuki moves to block her by stepping in her way, blood pounding in her head, slamming into her skull like sledgehammers.

“Don’t be a fool, Matoi,” Satsuki snaps back, steely expression not changing the slightest when Ryuuko leveled a heated glare at her. “Impulsively running headlong into danger, especially an unknown enemy, is suicide!”

She stiffened. Tempers flared, reason heedlessly ignored in the present of heated blood pounding, throbbing against her temples. Something within her stirred at such a display, the unfortunately familiar entity feeding into her anger, into each and every aggressive desire she possessed, overriding every last notion of rational thought. Something snapped in her then, indignance that her very own sister - patronizing as always - would possibly stop her from putting the greatest threat to humanity out of its misery.

“You don’t think I know that?” Ryuuko snarled, restraint failing as anger not her own continues to bleed into her mind, fingers curling into trembling fists. “You think I don’t know how *stupid* I was being that day, how easily I let myself get pissed off at that *bitch* and willingly walked into getting trapped with that... *thing* !?”

Scowling, she raises a leg, wincing as her foot shakily snapped against the rounded handle of Nui’s former scissor half and send it flying into her waiting hand, stomping away and doing the same with her favored blade soon afterward.

“I don’t have time for this,” Ryuuko growls, hefting both scissor swords and bringing them down onto the ground below, completely fracturing the grand bath with one fell swoop. “It’s going to escape and do this shit all over again. We’re going down there. And we’re going to end it all. ”

Water cascaded as it poured into the floors below, distantly impacting the floor below in muted splatters. Ryuuko glared at the abyss, blades rattling within white-knuckled hands in agitation. Satsuki looked on in concealed worry, her calm voice only serving to agitate the girl even further.

“Ryuuko.”

“You said we can’t afford to waste any time, right?” she snarled, not even bothering to look back.

“Yes, however - ”

“Then. Let’s. Go.” she growled back, marching over to her sister, snatching the other's hand, and forcefully tugging the heiress along in quick, powerful jerks.

“Ryuuko,”

Brows twitched. “What.” she growled, pulling all the harder against her sibling as her heels firmly dug into the ground and prevented any kind of movement whatsoever.

Senketsu’s cuff brushed against her hand in place of Satsuki’s voice. Identical pools of ruby froze, glare softening in painful understanding when roughly woven cloth registered upon sensitive flesh and remembered his presence. Her head turned, understanding flowing between both of them.

Wordlessly, she released her grip and spread her arms out in welcoming, the navy material of her god robe fluttering lovingly as he slipped himself upon her and hummed happily. A soft smile made itself known, the hybrid reveling in the faintest twinge of excitement racing through her veins at the well-known feel of his fabric upon her body once more. A nose brushed against his collar, a surreptitious sniff of cheap laundry detergent bringing back fond memories of innumerable nights spent at the Mankanshokus’ clinic-shack.

They knew what they both wanted.

“Senketsu!”

“Ready!”

A pair of fangs gripped the pin’s head and ripped it free from its track. A needle jabbed into a waiting vein, blood rushing up its hypodermic body and flooding waiting fibers. Stars blanketed her body, obscuring her naked form from view as the fiber mesh expanded before snapping back to envelop her. The familiar buzz of synchronization titillated her senses, an electric buzz that tingled wherever it touched. For a moment, she felt truly alive again, the pleasant company of his presence welcomed like a long-lost missing half to her whole. She breathed, his fabric stretching to encase her skin in gentle strokes, eye crests pulling high over her shoulders to look at her with unbridled joy. She stretched out an arm to inspect the materializing growth, briefly wondering when the last time she had truly synchronized with him was and relishing in the inexplicably wondrous buzzing feel of being together with him again.

And then...

Her back arched. A fresh howl tore itself from her throat, piercing the air as the tiling beneath them cracked, buckled, and shattered into innumerable pieces, fragmenting into spider web

designs. Blood bubbled at the scarlet trails of the kamui's design, spilling over glossy fabric and trickling down her body.

She could feel it, his presence as he struggled to work around this rabid onslaught, this instinctive barrier her suffering, corrupted body put in place against his. How he tried relentlessly to bond with her once more for her sake in the wake of a similar foe hijacking her body for its own purposes. How his form shivered on hers, his eyes twisted shut and every thread in his being straining in face of this insurmountable foe. They synced. Then desynced. Then resynced, all in a series of rapid stabs of razor-sharp torture. And then they separated, Senketsu instantly deactivating in a burst of scarlet scars, quivering upon her sweating flesh as she was knocked off her feet.

Ryuuko heaved, great gasping breaths escaping her as she weakly clutched at his lapels for comfort, the eight curiously looking over her with varying degrees of pity upon their faces. Her skin tingled, ruddy with bright orange color as her blood hissed and boiled like magma. Her heart pounded, slamming against battered ribs and punting straight into her throat. She coughed weakly, hacking up pathetic globs of mucous blood all the while. Senketsu whimpered beside her, remnants of angry, scorching blood biting away at his fabric.

"R-Ryuuko," he manages to gasp, straining to look up at her as electric shocks wrack his convulsing body. "Are you alright!?"

She struggles to right herself, only managing to sit up halfway before what felt like chainsaws ripping through her gut forced her to pathetically flop back onto her side. "Ngh... ! Sen... ket... su... !"

She reaches out to comfort him, feeling nothing but thin air in place of his comforting weight. Claw-tipped hands grasped, tugged at her skin, fingers frantically splaying across chilled flesh in search of familiar cloth, skittering past swathes of his navy fabric in her panicked haze.

"I'm here, Ryuuko," he soothingly reassures, allowing his fibers to massage hers in what he hoped was interpreted as a supportive gesture. "I'm right here, with you."

"Senks," she pants slowly, heart battering her ribs and blood pounding against her skull, "I don't know if we should do this."

"... Ryuuko... ?"

"I don't want to hurt you again. We'll find another wa- "

"We ... have to try... again... Ryuuko..." he counters, mustering rapidly dwindling reserves of his strength to steel his fibers against another onslaught, exuberance from finally reuniting with his chosen wearer all but driving him into desperate madness at the sudden, infuriating roadblock. Memories of the struggles they faced and overcame, lending each other their strength and support... it was impossible to conceive that this one instance would be the first to withstand their combined prowess. "Together."

“O... okay...” her head manages to dip in a clumsy nod, rattled lungs taking shaky breaths. She swallows harshly, reminded of the raid trip so long ago, when she traded her skin for his glove - the clearest sign of their utmost faith in one another. “I trust you.”

She pants as fingers labor to move, digits spasming as they struggle to straighten, to grip the seki tekko's pin and become the greatest symbiotic unity between human and clothing once more.

“It's not going to work, Matoi. I'm running an analysis on your most recent... synchronization... as we speak, and the results are... disappointing, to say the least.”

“What. Do. You. Mean?” Ryuuko growled angrily, eyes still tightly sealed and hisses of absolute agony escaping clenched teeth as the pads of her fingers still hove above the trigger.

Inumuta clicked his tongue in annoyance, fingers still flying over a wrist-mounted PDA. “What I **mean** is that while Junketsu need not be controlling or physically present *on* you, residual traces of its influence may be present within your own life fibers. If that extends to repulsing Senketsu's synchronization, its influence shouldn't be disregarded.”

“Great,” she grumbled, ruefully cracking open a lid and eyeing the god robe as he apologetically slipped off and stood beside her, fiddling with his cuffs all the while.

A choking cloud of black started to descend upon the rebels, wispy trails of smoke that fell through the opened ceiling.

“We've got to work fast.” Satsuki frowned grimly, properly donning the black kamui as Senketsu settled onto the Kiryuin elder's shoulders, her sister's baleful scowl growing in painful reminder that, even when freed, she was still yet bound by the internalized parasite's existence.

“-sugi! Sir!”

A hand tapped against the commsys, the medley of incoming voices obscured by heavy gunfire. “Mikisugi here. Report!”

KRRSH “We've got reports of COVERS swarming the area, sir! They're all coming from the rear of the buildi- oh, shit! They're coming! Hold them down, hold them down! Retreating back to the outside perimeter to regroup! We're low on ammo! Repeat, need ammo supply drop!”

“Shit.” Tsumugu growled, teeth grinding in frustration. “Looks like more of them were waiting for us there. They're attacking us outside as we speak.”

Satsuki nodded. “We'll take care of the primordial life fiber. Focus on defending against the COVERS. Nudist Beach needs all the support it needs.”

Aikuro grimly nodded. “We’ll scavenge what we can from upstairs - dropped a couple of supply packs all over the place after we rammed it into Ragyou and all. Hopefully, what’s left of the flooring above is intact and we can reach them in time. Tsumugu.”

The rifle bolt slid back as the cocking mechanism completed, metal clicking and solidly locking into place. “Let’s go.”

The two generals quickly retreated, quickly scaling up the broken mountain of debris to the upper floors.

Satsuki watched her sister carefully, clearing her throat. “Ryuuko.”

She sighed deeply, shaking her head to rid herself of idle thoughts. “Yeah,”

Satsuki nodded, flicking off the pin and allowing Senketsu to transform once more. “Lead the way.”

The hybrid flinched at the sight, seeming to jerk out of an induced stupor. Instinctively tearing her eyes away from Senketsu and forcing down wistful memories of synchronizing and fighting with him, she fumed. Envy couldn’t help but taint her thoughts however, indignance at the closest bond they could ever form denied thanks to one fuck-up involving a hasty decision to kill her mother by crushing her heart between her teeth. It just. Wasn’t. Fair. And it was all the fault of the primordial life fiber - this damned glorified ball of yarn.

She eyed the flooring beneath, feeling the heat warm her blood once more. Raising her scissor blades, she slammed them into the ground beneath her feet, opening a gaping portal to the chasm below. Water sloshed, splattering distantly against ancient carpeting and stone in whisper-quiet plinks. Besides the paltry light newfound fiber activation provided, there’d be no way to tell if they’d be landing on solid flooring or not. Sparing no thought, she leapt, falling

Down

Into

The

Darkness, landing hard on her heels and only sprinting once she felt the ground quake behind her in six intense bursts. Trusting her senses, she pushed on ahead, bare feet slapping ancient tile beneath in a steady rhythm, faint slivers of withdrawing orange leading her to the pulsing heart of -

She skidded to a stop, squinting with the abrupt change in lighting as slivers of pure white beamed directly into her eyes.

- the Kiryuuin curse.

Before her lay the doors that was the source of this madness, the chaotic storm that ripped billions of peoples’ lives apart for its own selfish desires. And as if her body was just realizing what lay behind those doors, the hairs on the back of her neck stood alert, fine

strands rising in goosebumped solidarity. At once, her nerves were aflame, every fibrous molecule in her body tingling, set on edge with nervous anticipation. A tongue ran over chapped lips, air forcefully sucked into fear-stricken lungs. This was it. This was where it began, and where it would end.

Timber groaned, splintering near their hinges. A thick knurling of threads choked the great doors like sprawling ivy, peeking out of every crevice possible to slither over the archway. Protruding from the walls and hanging from the ceilings, they bound the entranceway shut, tightly wrapping over its body.

She smirked, fingers lightly dancing over scissor hilts.

“You think that's enough to keep us from kicking your ass?” Ryuuko whispered to herself, raising eager arms above her head.

SHINK!

The threads felled, a colossal swipe of her twin blades sending them onto filth-laden flooring as tattered shreds. A mighty stomp kicked the flimsy barrier in, effortlessly knocking the double doors off their hinges in an eerily similar way to how Satsuki had done not so long ago -

- Only to get cut off as searing white-hot pain screamed through her veins and a choked cry escaped her.

A pointed snarl of twisted fibers protruded through her gut, sickly encased in blood. Mutely, she watched them as they rammed straight through, body momentarily paralyzed with shock. Time froze, crawling to a stop as arcs of freshly spilt blood soared through the air, similarly-colored eyes tracking their progress to see the surprised faces of the elites as they were brutally slapped aside by a flaying fiber-tendrill in her peripheral vision. Another spear thrust through Ryuuko's chest, leaving her to paw helplessly at the sharpened bit. A cape of lengthening navy strands whirled back in slow motion, shuddering breaths escaping. Spikes sprouted from the tendrill lodged within, branching paths that ravaged her insides and pierced her organs in a bloodthirsty rampage.

"Hello," the Primordial Life Fiber cheerfully greeted, positioning a similar tendrill between her eyes. *'And goodbye.'*

And with that, it thrust through her skull, neatly spearing through the bony plate and connecting with fragile gray matter. Her entire body gave a great twitch, then sagged as if a great weight suddenly befell it. Vision darkened, ears buzzed with white noise, and with breathless gasps for words and the muffled agonized cries of her name by her sister. Her eyes slowly started to loll to the back of her head as thin strands started to encase her head, faint flickers of neural activity her only company as she quieted, became still.

“Do you know what this is?” Ragyou questioned, holding in an open palm a mass of softly shimmering, loosely bundled threads.

Ryuuko remained unresponsive, waiting for her to continue. The matriarch lazily retracted her hand, letting it hover freely within the grand study the elder had sequestered them within, ensuring a private audience with her daughter - a curious gesture, given the empty state of the world outside.

“It is the very apex of life itself.”

She mutely nodded, the woman’s words resonating deep within her mind, where conjured memories of similar speeches throughout her youth lay nestled within. It was mere days after her purification, but she did not know that, for such an event - for such an unforgivable, abominable violation! - never happened in her mind, instead replaced with images of her foolish sister’s betrayal and her mother’s miraculous return to full health after endless nights of waiting by her bedside.

Garnet eyes twinkled with satisfaction as cerulean ones softened at her words, drinking them in willingly.

‘To wear clothing is to become impure, but these vestments of celestial gods are the height of purity. We strive towards purity by donning them,’ she mentally recited, the lesson committed to heart and mind and soul.

“Humanity’s first sin was donning clothing after obtaining the forbidden knowledge. In this manner, they fell from the state of purity they once possessed. Now, we don the vestments of the most pure and holy of all beings to regain this purity, to ascend far above the lesser creatures that humanity has become, all in part because we serve the apex of all beings.”

‘Fear is freedom. Subjugation is liberation. Contradiction is truth,’ she wryly thought, idly wondering where such phrases came from, for they seemed oddly familiar, somehow. An itch was building at the back of her mind, a persistent niggling that constantly demanded her attention like biting gnats the longer she tried ignoring it.

A shimmering white dress moved out of her vision, the trailing end of a beckoning finger calling her forward to the oversized bay windows that dominated the study.

“Come. I have something to show you.”

Ryuuko obediently tailed her mother, struggling to ignore incessant whispers tickling her mind, tempting her thoughts with wild fantasies of lashing out and tearing off the magnificence that was the kamui Junketsu from her body.

“Matoi!”

Ryuuko abruptly paused and cocked her head, acute ears sweeping the area in rapidly scanned increments.

“Matoi,” she murmured to herself, wincing when the mere mention of the name brought unbearable pain upon her temples. Pressure with godlike force pressed upon thin bone, seeking to shatter it into innumerable pieces until her very mind could be scooped out and her body left as an empty shell.

“Matoi... Matoi...!”

“Go... away... ” she groaned, cupping her ears and curling into herself, arms protectively wrapped around her head.

“Matoi! Matoi Ryuuko!”

Her stomach churned, bile threatening to rise and sear her throat and defile the great monument to the life fibers with its presence. “Not... my... name... !”

“Snap out of it, Matoi! Regain your senses!”

“Not... who I... am... ”

She staggered, knees threatening collapse as she swayed unsteadily on stiletto-clad feet. Legs shook, stubborn attempts to press forward merely intensifying their trembling.

She fell, knees throbbing in dull pain and chin smarting. And yet, she persevered, crawling on her belly like the serpent despoiling the legendary garden towards the brightly lit room, to the marvelous stained glass windows. She had to get closer to her mother... no matter what... No matter who stood in her way...

A kaleidoscope of colors and hues danced at her very fingertips, begging her to reach out and touch them. Yet, as soon as she did, they flitted further ahead, jerking away faster and faster until they started becoming nothing more than faint blips in the distance, microscopic crystals shining their brilliance in the unrelenting light. She strained, pushing herself harder, sobbing aloud when the room lengthened, faint shadows becoming dark and foreboding. She strained, flopping faster, squirming and panting and whimpering until dull white spots started to burn themselves into her vision. The world became painfully bright then, a blip halogen white appearing in her vision, growing to encompass all that she saw. Whorls of passing drifts tearing at her skin, it sucked her into the blinding void, leaving her with an arm weakly outstretched to a mother who continued to walk away, ignorant of her child’s plight. The rumbling din of thunder filled her senses, and with an acute burst of noise, her sight returned.

“Matoi! Ryuuko!”

Satsuki ducked under a broad sweep, rolled over to all fours, and pushed off. Tiling cracked underneath stomping heels, a trail of powerful pink and red flaring behind in her wake.

“Augh!”

SWAK!

A whip lashed out toward her, a single thread laced with serrated spikes about its edges. The elder Kiryuuin merely shifted her trajectory by mere inches, cleaving through its limb with ease, gaze as solid as solid titanium as nothing but her destination occupied her thoughts. That soon split into two, then four, then eight, sixteen, thirty two, and sixty four more, the frayed ends flailing as their master suddenly changed their course and directed them back towards the council president. She noticed the shifts in the air by the way it tousled the lengthy strands of her hairs, already had half-turned towards it and slashed out in retribution. But no matter how fast she severed their heads, more would appear in their stead like an infinitely headed hydra, threads now hundreds to a single bundle pushing to her limit. In a moment of temporary distraction, one such tendril collided against her head, flinging her away and mercilessly sending her to slam against a wall.

“Pathetic. Lay upon the ground like the human filth you are and die.” The primordial being scoffed, turning its focus back onto the youngest Kiryuuin.

Distantly, she registered hair-thin strands of fibers drifting across her vision like burning embers, vibrant orange dying to subdued red. She noticed her sister’s will to fight slowly slipping away, the approaching torrent of fibers splaying open like gaping maws ready to swallow her whole.

She winced, feeling the sting of broken ribs stab her in the chest as her arms scrabbled against patterned flooring. She cursed her feet - her traitorous , weak legs! - when all they managed to do was scrape against roughened stone uselessly.

Move!

Ryuuko blinked lazily in the light, the rays of golden yellow and fiery orange stabbing her eyes as much as the damned things were in her body. Fighting against a body growing limp, a body growing heavy and unresponsive as what seemed like invisible lead weights started to latch themselves onto her body, she groaned, thoughts becoming hazy and unfocused once more.

She gasped as her vision suddenly snapped back into focus, recognizing a familiar mop of brown hair suddenly appear before her, golden spiked weapons flailing about and cutting down the lances with one destructive blow. Ryuuko’s body bonelessly collapsed amidst hardened fiber shards, red lines already sprouting within to seal bleeding wounds shut. A small rivulet of blood burbled as lips parted to allow an astonished “Ma... ko... ?” though, the girl exhaling gently in relief as the fight club president defensively stood by her side.

The black cap bobbed atop its perch, chocolate eyes alight with unyielding fire burning bright within.

“Are you okay, Ryuuko-chan!?”

Her head curtly nodded once, fierce garnet framed by locks of untamed hair glinting wildly in the radiant light. Already, her body was recovering, internal fibers wrapping themselves around foreign ones left embedded in her system and digesting them, repurposing them to fix the very damage they had caused their host.

“Yeah,” she groaned when the remaining pinpricks of bored holes closed themselves off at last, cracking her neck and grinning savagely when the roiling orange tsunami seemed to bristle at her mere presence. “Ain’t gonna say much for this thing in front of us, but whatever.”

The air hummed with energy, the mammoth body of the primordial life fiber and its many smaller counterparts orienting themselves upright, lifting clear of the tunnel they worked on boring through. Dust fell in wispy clouds of brown and gray, clods shaken from their resting places as the being’s many bodies collectively shuddered. As if by magic, they all were drawn into the center of the enormous chamber, where they hovered, hundreds of fletched-tipped tendrils at the ready. Light emanating from the many orbiting bodies framed the hardened shell the main body possessed, hardened fibers rearranging themselves in great snakelike movements upon the mass to protect their host’s core.

Ryuuko held her sword aloft, tip pointed at the gathering storm even as the din became louder, more cacophonous in nature, the very thing screeching into her ears like ten thousand nails on just as many chalkboards. She brashly grinned, confidently stepping at the head of the recovering group in complete defiance of her prescribed fate.

“GO!”

Chapter End Notes

Note: Varying translations of the phrase “Don’t Lose Your Way” exist, none official.

あなたの道失うな (Presumably incorrect version pieced together after multiple syntax searches.)

もう意請の中で迷うな (Written by a calligrapher)

御前の道を迷わない用に / 道を迷わないように! (Adapted from a Black Butler song of the same name. The first iteration is a version Kurouga of the Ink and Snow helpfully created.)

In the original version of this chapter, Junketsu was supposed to have spoken in the O/PLF’s place. Ryuuko threatened suicide via crushing her heart so that both of them would die in response to its threats to overtake her body and murder everyone she cared about. Of course, this didn’t seem like a very Ryuuko thing to do, so it was cut.

Eden Again

Chapter Summary

... Bring it on home.

Theme: Death Row (Carl Noren)

///NUDIST ASSAULT IN PROGRESS///

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone, my name is Aguagi and today we're going to be doing the Kill Everyone Challenge in the Kiryuuin Mansion in the final mission of Down the Road. Let's get started.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Even the sun sets in Paradise

“Go!”

Columns the size of trees were ripped from their place along the facade by corded tendrils, an unrelenting stream of ancient stone hurtled towards the motley band of heroes in showers of plaster and concrete dust. Collectively, they leapt aside in scattered directions, narrowly avoiding the two-ton projectiles by mere inches as the payload struck rebar reinforced foundations and shook the colossal chamber to its roots with every strike.

CRACK!

Striking tangerine met spiked brown, hundreds of lithe strips parting from a whirlwind centered about its conjurer. Gamagoori braced himself, each strike against his uniform's buffer rattling him to the bone. Stone crunched underfoot. Steel dug into ivory, upended trails of gravel and cement trailing shoe-born craters. A hulking gorilla, shielded arms threw themselves before his face as darting tangerine sought to drive perfect holes into his skull, rasps of ripping material providing an orchestral testament to his uniform's great strength. A pause in attacks and they whipped to the sides, grasping retreating tendrils and yanking, his

determined grimace highlighted by the fiber-god's sickly yellow hues as he tore its many limbs from its body one by one.

Pink and blue zipped past in intertwining streaks, soaring high above and raining missiles below. Hard light clones weightlessly perched above shoulder-mounted speakers, they wordlessly interfaced with the goku uniform itself, adjusting its boosters and tweaking its flight pattern every so often when needed. Annoyingly chatty but welcome companions, they served as more than eyes at the back of her head, selflessly sacrificing their short lives by throwing themselves in the path of vines that sought to grasp, to drag them down to their deaths when they drew uncomfortably close, a new pair soon materializing into place when the previous ones were crushed to pixelated shards. A shinai whipped, barely managing to block the primordial's strike as the harsh crack of whip-on-wood sent him skidding away. He ducked as another grasped for his sword arm, hacking away at its unprotected form with a tailor's dagger when it entangled itself with the bamboo sword instead and smirking at the shrill bloodcurdling sounds it made in agony.

Energy crackled around Ryuuko's form as she sprang high over a Gamagoori-sized shard, the enormous metal-ridden projectile meant to reduce her body to a Jackson Pollock painting upon ancient walls instead crashing harmlessly against its fallen brethren. The swell of righteous fury surged through her, pure emotion shooting through in one concerted pulse through her limbs, propelling her along unfinished flooring as it shook underneath. Multipronged slivers of ominously glowing vines dangerously whizzed past the calloused pads of her heels by mere millimeters, spearing through the thick material with ease. She roared, slamming scissor blades against the hardened shell, flaring red screaming across the length of the blades and striking where it contacted with thunder unparalleled. Brows twitched and an annoyed growl escaped her when razor-sharp weapons harmlessly bounced off the plating instead, a lashing streak of tangerine harshly connected with her stomach in punishment.

“Oof!”

A vine flung her high in the air, a bundle of others acting in tandem to slam her down with a single whip-like slap soon afterwards. She lands - hard - falling body impressing a Ryuuko-shaped hole deep within solid rock. A woozy head of navy dares rise unsteadily above the pit, its reward given with many threads that latched tightly around bruising wrists, digging deep into skin until healthy peach is wrung out and trapped blood dyed flesh a deep maroon. Swords chatter with heavy metallic clangs, twin slivers of crimson deftly ripped from slackened hands and sent skittering to opposite ends of the great chamber. Skeins parted, ends securely wrapping about a limp ankle. Ryuuko shouts in fear as she is suddenly hoisted up, her limp frame hurled about at the monster's whim as a bludgeon, a crude cudgel to sweep Nudist rebels off their feet and send them skittering away.

CRACK

The ugly sound of her spine snapping in half fills her ears, fiber-infused body straining as it is forced to knit itself together over and over again with each concussive blow. A world of ochre and white become mere blurs, her eyes rolling about her sockets as her body parts company with the ground again and again, striking warm flesh and catching only glimpses of

their astonished expressions before they too become airborne. Colliding brutally against the hulking mass of the Disciplinary Head, the noose inadvertently loosed and the fiberborn flung away in a screaming, spinning apricot-colored blur.

Ryuuko crashed through the ruined walling, shooting clear through a pillar before slamming face first onto the ground. Lifting an unsteady head and shaking loose fine granules of bloodied dirt from tousled hair, she glowered, leveling a heated glare at the fiber-god. It hummed, ominously looming over her prone form as innumerable limbs splayed to frame its sides like rays of golden sunshine.

"It's such a shame that I would have to destroy a fine specimen like you. A perfect fusion of life fibers and humans are hard to come by, much less survive the maturation process."

She unsteadily rose to a half-crouch, rubbing her skull as bones healed and lethal fractures rewound, injuries undoing themselves in a matter of seconds. "Yeah, well you could go easier on me," she snarled underneath her breath, flicking loose minute droplets of residual blood from returning fingertips.

"Ryuuko," Senketsu shouted, "Watch out!"

Feeling the hairs on the back of her neck rise, she instinctively leapt forward, combat rolling into a half-curved heap just before the life was extinguished by falling facade pieces. Her teeth chattered, jaw bouncing and snapping shut in quivering clicks as the felled rock's sheer weight collided against the flooring below, its rebound arcing overhead and slamming mere inches away from splayed fingertips.

The primordial being hummed in mock-consideration. *"Hm. Perhaps you shan't be a waste after all. Perhaps..."* she ducked, tendrils jabbing the space where her head was mere milliseconds ago, whipping back to tail her retreating form closely, *"...repurposing your body would be much more productive. I wonder..."*

The air thrummed, a low buzz that unpleasantly resonated deep within their bodies. Ryuuko instinctively curled tighter into herself, the fibers in her body moving unpleasantly underneath her skin like live worms.

"I believe you had done something quite like this. Allow me to perform it on a much greater scale."

"...!" she breathed sharply, watching in horrified awe as its power rippled out as invisible waves, corrupting everything it touched.

Without warning, the goku uniforms reacted, snapping tightly around their wearers, turning them round to face each other. Nonon squawked in surprise when her body was forced to move against her will once more, her regalia forcing her higher and higher, slamming her mercilessly against the ceiling above with only the sturdy construction of protruding shoulder masses preventing her from streaking the hallowed space with fractured bone. Terrified, she screamed, fighting against her own body as it merely wrenched her higher, pushed her faster,

slammed into concrete sidings harder whilst raining heart-shaped projectiles onto her allies below.

“Hey!” Sanageyama leapt into action as a darting streak of white flitted in his peripheral vision, turning and slashing through the threads that pulled the giant upward and into a waiting maw.

Shk, shk, shkshkshkshkshkshk!

He landed in a half-crouch, short bursts of heat fanning across his bared back when the glowing orb that sought to devour them burst into mere scrap cloth and exploded a mere second later.

“My thanks, Sanageyama,” Gamagoori rumbled from where he lay in the cratered ground below, massaging his aching head with a massive hand.

The shinai wielder nodded his acknowledgement and swiftly leapt onto the next tier of pillars, slowly but surely leapfrogging his way to swat down a certain pink troll next. Heart blasted towards him, the neatly flipped and sidled past, bringing his favored sword above her head and slamming it against her uniform with a mighty **CRACK!** Catching a column as they both fell, he quickly used his remaining momentum to swing around and launch himself back towards her, kick his fellow elite in the back, and punt her safely onto a hanging ledge.

Satsuki cupped her ear, flicking at the battered commsys and hoping to all of high heaven that it still worked. “Nudist Beach, come in! I repeat, Nudist beach, requesting status!”

The bead buzzed in her ear, electric crackles grating harshly against thin tissue in chainsaw blade-soft *krrrrshh* -ing interference. There was heavy breathing, a pitiful attempt at forming words, the wearer too busy animatedly shouting commands to peers and leaders alike. Distant gunfire reached her ears, thunderous barks of pistols and submachine guns alike freely intermingling with the terrified shouts of Nudists and students alike.

She felt her heart drop to her feet. This wasn’t supposed to happen. They were supposed to be extracted and taken back to one of the many underwater satellite Nudist Beach havens that permeated through Japan. They weren’t supposed to be here!

And where was the evac, dammit! **Where was the evac!?**

“Nudist Beach! Come in! This is Kiryuuin Satsuki requesting updates!”

The space to her immediate left shimmered the slightest bit, like water disturbed by fish swimming far below its surface, and Satsuki reacted. Houka wheezed his thanks as twin Bakuzan suddenly found their way into his kidneys, optical camouflage collapsing about him and an ominous shock rattling his ultima's seams as he continued struggling against otherworldly control over his uniform.

"I repeat - "

"Commander! We are currently still within a two kilometer perimeter of tango! No sign of evac or supply drops anywhere! COVERS present and - they're still coming, damn it! They're - "

The feed abruptly cut off, ungodly screeches that relentlessly assaulted their eardrums coming from every direction around them, ghostly talons that clawed at their brains from the inside out placed in its stead.

A nail flicked out, channels swapped for the personal line between herself and the upper ranks in a burst of static.

"Captain Mikisugi! Commander Kinagase, report!"

"We're pinned down!" the sniper growled, sliding the bolt back on his favored rifle and loading in another round.

A weary sigh at the other end of the line. "It'll be another couple of minutes before reinforcements arrive, but we'll stall as much as we can. Something tells me these COVERS ain't just for our little raiding party here."

"Lady Satsuki!" a voice called, and she turned just in time to see the god-fiber pinning her elites' arms to their side, wrapping more strands around their bodies and faces. If it couldn't make them into decorative wall art, slowly crushing the life out of them would certainly do the trick.

"Lady Sats- *gurk* !"

The wonders of oxygen and vision slowly being robbed from her, Nonon's head was snapped to the side, forcefully turned towards her companions, who were in similar states of immobility. They struggled, trying to reach for the tiny daggers the nudist group allotted them, kicking their legs out and wriggling them in vain attempts to knock loose the hardened knives from where they sat atop their regalia.

SHINK!

Great bundles of slewn fibers dropped to the ground, the ebony-haired warrior resolutely glaring even as her subordinates wriggled free. The primordial's great grasping arms dove for them once more, unwilling and unable to let go of the perfect opportunity to get rid of the greatest threats to its existence once and for all.

Satsuki rose to their defense, staunchly facing off against the orange tide that reared up before her. She stared unflinchingly back when they swayed like cobras waiting within grassy thickets, chin raised high and gaze defiant. They moved, and she dodged, stabbing and slicing at them if only to agitate them even more, to ensure that their focus was on her alone. And when she was sure they were, she stood still, trusting the kamui lying atop her to divine her true intentions. With a hungry roar, they rushed forward, wrapping themselves around her, fully drowning her within its mass in a blink of an eye. They looped around once, twice, spinning her around to face the great celestial body, crushing her bones as the snaring extension made to feed back into the waiting primordial being.

"Fool. Do you think yourself powerful enough to escape the fate prescribed for you?"

The Kiryuuin merely smirked, however, for as the threads wrapped tighter and tighter and her body was forced into increasingly uncomfortable positions, Senketsu reacted. Blades as innumerable as the sand on the shore sprouted from its edges as soon as it foolishly opened a gaping maw to swallow her whole, long slivers of red that effortlessly tore through woven cloth and mercilessly hacked its insides to pieces in chainsawed movements before it hastily flung her away and reshielded itself.

Ryuuko for her part was beside herself, forced onto bended knee as dense columns of fibers bore down on crossed scissor blades. Rebar-infused concrete was crushed into fine powder underfoot, dusting heels stark white as plumes continuously billowed past in this titanic show of strength. Muscles trembled. Pain lanced her rapidly-beating heart in sharp spurts as she was pushed to exhaustion, the taxed organ pounding relentlessly against her ribs like sledgehammers every time it throbbed. She gasped in panted breaths, lungs burning for air and scorching paper-thin tissue with stabbing needles. And slowly, steadily, her body was forced to curl in on itself under their sheer weight. Bones creaked, fracturing as her face drew nearer to unfeeling stone, mere centimeters away from being ground into a pulpy mass. Her

jaw clenched, brows twitching as thick beads of sweat streaking past heated cheeks burning red with frothing blood.

There had to be another way, damn it, there just had to be!

What if I...

Despite it all, a wild grin spread across her face, a stupid, reckless idea comfortably taking hold of her thoughts. With a mighty shout, she pushed back, pouring every ounce of her strength into shifting her blades.

Come on... come on...

Fat beads of sweat trickled past a face contorted into an ugly snarl, veins popping out the sides of her head as she struggled, as she strained to even move them by a mere millimeter.

Just a little more... !

There!

Thick layers of concrete cracked, vaporizing into fine gray dust as the tendrils' great weight was rolled off her and sent crashing to her feet. She dodged, pushing past spearing lances with ease in leaping bounds and strides, focus wholly locked onto a moving black blur. Sidling back-to-back with her sister, she moved in sync with the elder's movements, the two of them sharing a curt acknowledging nod before turning their attention back to the enemy at hand.

"Hey, Satsuki. Your nerd said that I retained the abilities I got from those kamuis, right?"

"Effectively," she responded, crisply deflecting an attacking vine with a snap of her wrist and a single swipe of Bakuzan's twin blades.

"You're immune to this Absolute Domination crap thanks to the thing Senketsu and I have going on, and I ain't affected because absorbing whatever rag Ragyou was wearing happened to transfer its abilities to me as well."

"You have a plan?"

Lips parted in a smug smirk. "Hell yeah I have a plan. Keep distracting it for me."

Satsuki lifted her blades and rushed the oncoming glowing tide in lieu of a response as Ryuuko kicked off the ground with an explosive roar of wind, darting past its defenses and slashing away at the protective coating the thick bundles had on the delicate threaded being. The fiberborn leapt, vaulting past sharpened defenses that sought to pin her to the wall and leave her to bleed out, landing atop one of the smaller orbs that seemed to continuously orbit its central mass. From her vantage point, she could see the multiple colored dots that denoted her allies below, muttering curses as their uniforms were once again rendered useless and their lives forfeited to the glorified yarn ball's whims. Fiery yellows and oranges approached in a colossal rippling mass, seeking to devour its helpless targets without delay.

Garnet narrowed, a scowl twisting her features as they rushed to envelop the devas. A puff of air, and she sprung off just as ten fiber-spears stabbed the air where her torso was, sliding down the thick vines the fiber-god possessed like a professional surfer. Sliding along the vast network of tendrils the Primordial possessed, she moved in unison with the fiber-god, ducking and leaping past darting vines that sought to snare, to twist around her and hold her helpless while their master ravaged the last of humanity's defense against the parasitic clothing.

"Transfer student!"

A mop of navy swiveled. Attention diverted, a broad savage sweep, a bone-shattering whiplash slapped her aside, sending her face first into the ground.

She spat out a thick wad of blood. "GRAH!"

"Transfer!"

A head shakily rose, scarlet shrinking within ivory depths as she took stock of the massive pillars about to drop onto the musician.

"Oh, crap!" She panicked, legs abruptly kicking out like those of a startled rabbit. "Aeugh, uhh..."

"Do something!"

Adrenaline shot in her veins at the sound of her desperate cry, a chill sweeping down her spine and restlessness sending muscles into spasms. Like a demon clawing at her insides, it grated against her nerves, turning her into a shaking but acutely attuned quivering mass. There was no way she could reach her in time, not with the primordial life fiber constantly in the way.

She swore under her breath, cursing her inability to move as billions of frenetic thoughts as curled fists beat against the sides of her head.

C'mon, think... think!

Eyes darted up the columns, across the room, past the writhing vines that all but filled the vast space between, then at the curled fists she slammed against the ground.

!!!!

She paused, eyes widening at the revelation.

That's it!

Determined, she stabbed at the ruined floor beneath, using her swords to rise to half-bent knees and all but shaking with excitement. Standing on wobbly feet, she inhaled sharply, turning fully towards her. She felt the rush of power behind her, the ebbing tide of an indescribable high so faintly familiar when her body was not her own. She opened her mouth...

...And rasped.

No thunderous shout issued forth, no all-powerful call for the three star's goku uniform to heed her will. She swore under her breath.

"That's not helping!" Nonon shrieked, watching as the columns moved into place above her, their shadows completely enveloping her diminutive form.

She tried again. And again. And again.

A choke.

A breathless gasp.

The whistling of air as they fell.

A wet squelching sound as a thin garotte wrapped itself around a throat and tightened, breaking flesh as it squeezed and squeezed.

"Trrraaaaansfееееееer!"

“Oh, *come* on!” she rasped out between strangled attempts for breath, hefting a sword as its twin was made to blindly slash and stab at the fiber-filled space behind her.

Fifteen meters... ten... five...

SHNK!

Nonon cried in surprise as she was suddenly carried out of harm’s way just as the first of the debris scraped against her cheek, the scissor-shaped savior easily piercing through the oversized speakers mounted upon her shoulders and pinning her against a wall. Her sigh of relief abruptly rose into a high-pitched squeak when heels planted themselves on either side of her, a hand roughly reaching out to yank both her and the sword free. The world shook up and down, rolling around as if it were tossed about in a planet-sized dryer. Pink eyes lazily followed its path, becoming unfocused and quite queasy looking the longer she was jostled. The same hand whipped out to the side and curled round a torso, immediately righting her and snapping it against hers. Two pairs of feet left the ground, speeding off mere milliseconds before the downpour of ancient stanchions collided with and drove the life out of their bodies. A cloud of debris chased after them, whipping strands of pink and blue as they spirited away, death licking at their heels.

“Augh!”

A flash of white and Ryuuko was suddenly launched into the air, kicked up with human payload in tow as stone walling came crashing down around them.

“Shit! Shit, shit, shit, shit, shiiiiiiiiiiiiit!”

Their bodies flew apart, a colossal blast flinging them to opposite sides. Crashing hard against cement, Ryuuko’s body flopped over, rolling to an uneven skidding stop.

SWAK!

“GURK!”

She looked down, eyes widening when she beheld a shoulder-length stretch of rebar cleanly running through her body, nailing her to the floor. Brows furrowing as her body twitched and seized around it, she shakily raised her arms, wrapping trembling fingers around its base. She hissed, the slightest movement about it provoking heart-wrenching agony. Breaths coming in rapid and shallow and vision starting to blur, she pulled at its corrugated length, frantically twisting until it snapped in her hands. With a weary but triumphant groan, she heaved herself off the jutting metal spear, flopping over as exhaustion overwhelmed her in one fell wave.

A shadow fell over her.

Still drained beyond measure, she could do nothing but watch as she was stabbed a thousand times more in rapid succession, each of the hair-thin fibers lodging deep within her flesh and

slowly dragging her slumped body upward. And as if wordlessly bidden, a COVER slunk underneath branching vines, its serpentine body swaying hypnotizingly from side to side as its mouth opened to eagerly receive its new host. Flesh joined cloth and jaws snapped shut, woven body squeezing tight around hers.

White and red met, melding into each other in frighteningly familiar synergy. Flesh disappeared under stiff-creased cloth, suit instantly snapping into a muscled titan that rivaled small skyscrapers in size.

The COVER bellowed, grasping concrete chunks as wide as its body between thick, clumsy fingers, heaving them over its head and preparing to launch them at the startled, distracted party underneath.

SHNK! SHNKSHNKSHNKSHNKSHNK!

Ryuuko roared as she burst out of her cloth prison, sleek decapitory blades flung out behind arms akimbo. She landed in a half crouch, skin singeing and reforming in rapid succession as boulders rained down upon her collapsing captor, its disemboweled body writhing in explosive death throes. Heaps of burning cloth landed behind her, flames whispering as they licked and devoured the living cloth whole. Rising to her feet, she inspected her blade, frowning when twitching threads made themselves known on its sides, the individual strands wriggling desperately for life even as Ryuuko snapped her sword into the air like a whip, and mercilessly cleaved them in half not a second later.

Looking up, she saw hundreds of COVERS more pouring out of the gaping entranceways made by the remaining columns, already streaking down towards her in a whitewashed torrent. Pools of fiery red shrunk, mirrored lenses dully reflecting their charging approach. Her breath caught, jaws working uselessly like a fish out of water.

“S-Satsuki!”

“Retreat!”

Chattering gunfire and the trampling of several dozen pairs of feet met his command, a sea of naked bodies pushing past to greet the convoy of rugged supply trucks tearing past the dense treeline. Swarming the arriving armored vehicles, they clawed at the doors, banging at reinforced glass and all but flooding the compartments once reinforced doors opened to get them in. Seconds, minutes, nobody was even sure how long this damned battle had been going on now, but as the naked soldiers struggled past panicked civvies to retrieve the much-needed ammo resupply against an impossible foe, the pit of dread grew in their stomachs.

Mikisugi led the guerrilla pack, personally overseeing the evacuation process as dozens spilled into the cramped interior - and then some. Watching as the first of three supply trucks were emptied of their cargo and loaded with precious human ones, he turned away just as a dozen more hopped on and clung for their lives to the roofs and metal sides of the trucks as they sped away. Shouting resumed on the impromptu battlefield, subordinates and equals alike resetting their gear and spraying withering fire at swooping cloth once more. A quick scan, a cursory sweep of the remaining personnel and stranded students that remained with him, and he was soon richly rewarded.

“Toshihiro!”

The young man snapped into a salute instinctively, the blue-haired nudist leader urgently waving it away before neatly-aligned fingers stopped in a perfect 45-degree angle.

“We need access to the intel files. I just remembered something that we went over during a briefing a couple weeks ago.”

He blinked, jaw agape. “The - ah... Pardon me?”

“Intel files. Look up for ones created less than 2 weeks ago.”

He fumbled, pulling a pda out of the many pockets lining his utility belts. “It’s gonna take some time. It’s lodged somewhere in the files shared across the - ”

Now he was getting irritated. He snorted impatiently, breath vaporizing into thick white mist like an angry dragon bursting out of its volcanic lair.

“Hurry, man! We’ve got lives on the line!”

The sound of fingers tapping across a glass screen put him on edge, made the crushing anxiety screeching fibers and the own angry bray of his long-term partner and friend all the more unbearable. He didn’t even notice the device mere inches from his face until it practically was pushed up against his nose.

“Sir?”

Madly, eagerly, he snatched the black device out of the officer’s frozen digits, scanning and flipping through *tediously* detailed reports until he found it. One line. One description. One picture. A private airfield located at the rear of the complex.

“Tsumugu!” he called, tossing it at the snowback the sniper was perched upon. “There’s a helipad somewhere in the rear of the complex! If we can get there in time -”

“And if those damn things have an ounce of oil left in them -”

“Yeah, if they have any fuel left we can use those vehicles to exfiltrate the rest of us!”

Cigar smoke tore wispy gray lines in the air, enamel grinding against the paper coating and tearing into the tobacco plant. The mohawk haired man inhaled the acrid smoke sharply, briefly closing his eyes before nodding his assent.

“Go! I’ll cover you!”

Satsuki froze as her sister’s desperate cry reached her ears, the crack in her voice alerting her to something far worse than what she imagined. Her breath hitched, confusion evident on her face when the sheer numbers of living cloth all but saturated the space above, turning the tide firmly back into the primordial’s favor.

“Hey, guys,” Uzu panted, struggling to repel the seemingly endless airstrike the original god-fiber launched at him amid the generous amounts of COVERS. “I just thought of something.”

“Now that’s a surprise,” Nonon muttered under her breath as she jetted away from a pair of waiting jaws, rockets straining and emitting high-pitched whines as she kicked it into overdrive. “The monkey does have two brain cells to rub against each other after all.”

“Not now, Sanageyama,” Ira grunted, rapidly throwing crossed arms as another whip slammed against his transformed uniform. “This is not the most appropriate time fo- ”

“No, but guys,” he insisted, “it’s important. Why is it still here?”

“Heh?”

“Yeah,” he continued, diving to the side and grunting as what he hoped to be a spectacular reenactment of James Bond’s stunts turned into a pathetic belly flop. “It knows that if it can just leave Japan, we’d be effectively screwed, right? Nobody can catch up to it except for Lady Satsuki and Senketsu. And she said it had enough power to breach through its chamber, right? So... why isn’t it doing that? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Unless... ” the Elites collectively murmured, wracking their brains.

“It’s waiting for something... ”

“... or someone...” Satsuki murmured, eyes fearfully shrinking to mere blue specks as realization dawned upon her. “... Ryuuko!”

“Ryuuko!”

She snapped her head up, attention instantly diverted from the massive deity that antagonized her so. Ecstatic, the celestial being drew even closer, a fine branch creeping and slithering

along the ground until it lay in wait at her feet. Sensing its target's inaction...

... it darted out...

... and grasped the single bold streak of red hanging low over her eyes.

She crumpled in an instant, howling as the brilliant scarlet lock was suddenly and completely ripped free from her, the bang waved tauntingly in front of watering eyes. Pulsing feverishly in orange bursts, a wave of dark purplish blue soon encompassed its entirety, driving the vibrant carmine from its base in a stunning mirror of what she had done with her reclaimed scissor blade a short while ago. The primordial being laughed delightedly, thick orange bands callously flinging strands before her writhing, half-curved body as it rolled from side to side, hands clasping the bleeding, broken skin where the proud streak of red used to be.

"I've taken the liberty of sifting through the repressed memories, of what your progenitor had done during my awakening. The results? Impressive. Your ability to break free of her control was duly noted, as was the beginnings of unconscious control over additional life fiber appendages."

Ryuuko flattened herself against the ground as fibers streamed forth from an approaching COVER, lashing out blindly at the suit's darting fibers. It dodged, taking advantage of eyes squeezed shut in unbearable agony, brushing against her bare back and looping around a quivering waist. Instantly, tired muscles seized, snapping to rigid attention as an expression of utmost fury overtook her face. An arm swung out.

"GRAH!"

SHNK!

Now in tatters, the ruined cloth fluttered to the ground, its fellow COVERS continuing to crowd her despite the threat of swiftly swinging scissor swords.

Unbeknownst to her, that same single thread lay in wait, hovering perilously close to the one spot that could make or break humanity's fate. The star-crossed sign, the ultimate symbol of humans and aliens' respectively incompatible, selfish desires.

And in that moment, it struck, latching onto the back of her neck and planting its roots at its base. She swore when the lancing pain struck her to the core, clutching her head in agony.

Still half-blinded, she ran, tripping and stumbling over clumsily moving feet.

“Ryuuko...” she heard someone whisper.

She skidded to a halt, a cold sweat breaking out upon hearing that sickening, familiar groan, the blood in her veins freezing solid as a world-weary sigh that brought long-suppressed feelings to the surface.

“Ryuuko... my poor daughter,”

Legs wooden and her body unresponsive to a mind desperately screaming for it to move, to flee, to put as much distance between her and the ever-present threat to humanity, a head slowly turned, pupils becoming mere specks in a swathe of white upon locking eyes with a hauntingly familiar pair. And in that moment, the world ceased to be, the entire universe boiling down to the two of them in that tiny two meter space between.

Her father stood before her, supported by many pulsating life fiber lines that pierced his emaciated flesh. From a bundle of drawn-out life fibers, he grimaced, threads meshing together to create the semblance of a body, orange knitting tightly to morph into a slender form. His skin was paper thin, paler than the marble so prominently featured throughout the mansion and riddled with rotting pits. Like a broken marionette, he was held by only those anchor points, visibly sagging where invading fibers dared not touch. Flesh broken and musculature bared, organs spilled out of a long gash hewn down the center of his ragged body, mirroring that which he fatally received when he was stabbed long ago by his gleeful murderer.

Ryuuko trembled. It couldn't have been; it shouldn't have been. He should have been destroyed two times over, she'd seen his disintegration firsthand. But the ashen scent of oaken wood and fire wafting across her nose and setting nerves into a dizzying panic, the ethereal glow that surrounded the air and strained her eyesight, and the less-than-sophisticated demeanor it possessed - it was much too real for it to be a mere illusion.

“D-D-Dad,” she stuttered, rooted to the ground in shocked horror.

“Ryuuko!?” she faintly heard a panicked baritone voice call out to her. “Ryuuko, listen to me! Get out of there!”

But she couldn't, she wouldn't, her senses straining, trying to take in everything that lay before her at once. Even as threads ominously reared up behind her like cobras and were only kept at bay by her sister's fastidious blades, she stood transfixed. Indeed, as she gazed upon the visage of her father, the small thread that lanced her brain drew taut, shutting down every part of her mind that correctly recognized it as the farce it were, draping a cover of desperate hope over her eyes.

Isshin Matoi stalked towards her, trailing a decaying digit under the soft of her slackened jaw, tracing a line up its bony path to her ear, where stub-chewed fingers faintly brushed over delicate cartilage in an eerie mirror of how he used to do so when she was naught but a mere child. Stunned, Ryuuko could only watch with wide eyes as she instinctively leaned into its touch, bittersweet memories brought to the forefront of her mind. She did nothing as he circled around her like a stalking tiger, attention fully devoted to the one person that should have been by all means dead and reduced to ash as he hovered before her.

Delicate hands rested upon her bared shoulders, a head flanked by shaggy silver hair resting on the space between her neck and shoulder. Her cheeks flushed red with agitated blood, the ghost of a human breath skating past peachy skin as whispered words wormed their way into her brain. Unbidden, a tear leaked from moistening eyes, carving a wet path down a cherry-red cheek.

Her stomach churned. Hunger for love and approval mixed unpleasantly with feelings of resentment and loneliness, of countless nights wandering the earth ditching school grounds as a boarding student, endlessly searching for reasons *why* he had done what he did. A calloused hand twitched, straining against deaf nerves to reach up and touch the man before her, to lash out and strike him in his face with all her might, to watch him crumble before her like panes of shattered glass for everything he had done and failed to do. Heartbeats skipped, mind torn in indecision as she tried to focus, synapses firing wildly in pained concentration.

She swallowed thickly, locking eyes with his. Her heart panged the longer he looked upon her with that wistful yet somber expression, committing to memory his eyes down to the very detail of his irises, every pit and furrow that decorated the brilliantly colored surface. And suddenly she was seven years old again, lost in time and abandoned between the boarding school's pillar-gates, helplessly extending a hand to in vain prayers to a father that would never come. He smiled, aging lips parting to reveal crooked and yellowed teeth exactly the same way she remembered seeing in his final moments.

The creature inside her stirs, pining after him with more than a nostalgic heart, faint recollections of days spent idly dreaming away for a time when he would arrive at the school gates to bring her home with welcome arms.

It wants.

Needs.

Hungers.

Familiar love - the very thing she was denied from the moment of her birth - gnawed relentlessly at her insides. It burned terribly, urging her to draw closer, to meld her body against his and snuggle against his hold no matter how much of a farce it truly was.

She sniffled pitifully, shakily raising a hand to brush against his.

And then, he morphed.

Isshin shrunk, losing the tattered lab coat so vividly present in both her dreams and nightmares and gaining an elegant fitted dress suit. Hair the texture of dried wheat shed, a grizzled gray-white mane forced out to make way for navy tresses, ratty lengths traded for a slightly tamer, downturned style. Graded colors started to shine at its underside, striking bloody red and muted prussian blue being featured most prominently within visible swathes. A heavy scent tickled her nose, the sharp metallic tang of drying ichor featured most prominently. She stood in front of Ryuuko, gently pulling her close before resting her chin upon her crown, a contemptuous smile upon her face as lithe dextrous hands wove their way through snarled hair and lightly scratched at the skin underneath. Garnet pupils twitched within vast ivory swathes, drinking every inch of the mirage in.

She was the epitome of what she would grow into, had she continued blindly obeying the life fibers and fought for their universal victory as their personal champion.

She was beautiful.

And the sight filled her with rage.

She launched her head against her double's, heedlessly screaming bloody murder as the crack of bone-on-bone only spurred her on. "I'm going to kill you! Kill you, kill you, **kill you!**"

She lashed out, swinging blindly at things that weren't there, the images of Isshin and her corrupted own's faces swimming before her, their gentle-expression'd faces and velvet whispers tickling her ears somehow drowning out the ringing blasts and roaring explosions that shook the world to its foundations around her. And all the while, they danced in front of her, easily dodging erratic swipes of her red blades, seemingly winking in and out of existence as a certain pink-clad seamstress had done so many times before. And the comparison served to agitate her further, the knowledge that that *bitch* was still out there gratingly rasping against her conscience. And as if summoned by mention alone, her very image took the place of the Ragyou-Ryuuko clone, sickly saccharine voice easily worming its way into her ears with many more following suit, the girl smiling widely and patting her head as if she were a scraggly mutt between half-spoken, half-sung cajoles.

"Hehe, you're so lovely when you're angry Ryuuko-chan~! You know, you can't hit me, even if you tried. You didn't avenge your dear old daddy that way, and you -"

"SHUT UP!"

Heels struck, launching a screaming missile of crimson and flesh further into the recesses of the fibered being's chamber, her raging, huffing form sprinting after her teasing smile, the small tapered point of a pink tongue barely peeking through glossed lips. She howled, lengthening scissor swords slashing, blindly slamming into numerous pillars holding the very room up as the pink-red pair danced-bolted between ivory columns. Chunks of bunker walling the size of cars crashed against the ground dangerously close to the Nudist rebels below, their cries of panicked shock only serving to incite her further drive her to snuff the blonde out of existing, to drive her frothing rage to a heated boil.

"I've had **enough!**"

SLASH!

"Of!"

SHNK!

"Your!"

SWAK!

"Bullshit!"

"Matoi!"

The clone again, her faux-comforting smile stretching wide across a gaunt face as shades of cherry blossom pink became sky blue and white.

"You were tricked into believing you were one of these lesser beings, kept away from your true destiny. You've had but a taste of the exquisite power the life fibers hold. Come, face it and take it within you, and you will ascend as the new god of the universe!"

"REAAARGH!"

A devastating swipe, a streak of crushing air painted red, a screaming arc of sangria and mahogany that wildly flew past friends and allies alike, cleaving a chasm into the earth mere inches away from where the rebels' feet stood.

“Matoi! Ryuuko, stop!”

But Satsuki’s words hit her too late, for by the time she snaps out of her forcefully induced enraged trance, she had wandered too far into the serpent’s pit, ran too fast and too far ahead for help to assist her, even as they swiftly clomped to her aid like a charging herd of elephants.

A booming voice, a smug hiss that sounded as if it were uttered right in her ear. *"You thought the destruction of the She-Kiryuuin would mean the safety of your world, that all you had to do was destroy us to save your precious planet - an easy task, given our supposed immobility and your greater numbers. But you thought wrong."*

She whipped around, the slightest brush of passing air giving away its intentions too late.

"Now... "

SHNK!

She choked, her own rasped breath filling her ears as her sight vanished, her world turning black in the blink of an eye as a thick band forced its way into the back of her neck, fiber lines invading her body and wrapping around her own. Her body collapsed, knees hitting unfeeling ground as her muscles’ ability to stand was suddenly robbed from her. A pulse of yellow traveled through orange branches, slowly moving down the tendril’s length to find its way home within the delinquent’s body.

"...Fulfill your destiny."

Vertebrae cracked, back arched to the near-point of breaking. A mouth split open to display prominent fangs in breathless howls, pain best described as lighting striking her face ravaging her body. She screamed. Painfully bright light issued forth from parted jaws, a beautiful collision of colors and hues that blended seamlessly, shifted and changed between yellows and reds and oranges, between blues and greens and purples depending on the angle it was viewed at. Pulses of pure energy broke through bunker ceilings in veritable showers of plaster dust and splintered wood, quasar bolts of rainbow light becoming a mere twinkle in the heavens as it rushed forth to spread the message to feed.

To propagate.

To consume.

“I need a sitrep, now!”

Aikuro poked his head out of the cargo helicopter, instantly swearing as seemingly endless droves of the white fabric honed in on the small helipad.

“Come in! Hello!”

Tsumugu slammed his rifle’s stock at the ice coating the chopper, snarling under his breath when the thick, glittering coating refused to even come off in tiny flakes.

“Damn it,” the blue-haired man griped, quickly crowding the remaining club members into the enclosed space.

Movement caught both leaders’ attention, startling them into craning their necks upward as far as they would go. The world blackened, the light of the moon blotted out as thousands of suits streamed overhead. For a moment, the living suits that doggedly followed them so seemed content to meander aimlessly above, abruptly freezing where they hovered as an unearthly ripple seemed to ebb and flow through time and space itself.

And then...

...the world erupted in magnificent beams of light and color, sweeping rays of hues and shades that seemed to burn a rapidly growing path through the inky black skies above. The nudist hurriedly shielded his eyes, staggering back into the cover the abandoned aircraft thankfully provided.

“What the - !?”

The chatter of gunfire drowned out anything else he had to say, powerful barks of thunder and lightning issuing forth from gun metal gray as the COVERS seemed to grow larger, more powerful in the brilliant aurora.

Tsumugu traded his sniper rifle for his lighter, more favored weapons, barking instructions at subordinates practically frozen in fear at the sight. “Get to cover, get to cover, damn it!”

He raised his dual submachine guns, hastily squeezing the trigger at the growing crowd, only to be met with ominous clicking sounds as his magazine emptied the last of its clip. He groaned and felt the many pockets lining the utility belts on his uniform for another one, only finding various ones for pistols and his rifle instead.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“AAAAUUUUUGHHHH!”

Satsuki flinched at her anguished wail, whipping about to face her sister. Cobalt widened. “Ryuuko!”

Ryuuko cried in agony, forced to watch events unfold far beyond her control through watery, half-lidded eyes. The rebellion paused in their assault to gape upward, layers of hardened

cloth forming from human livestock drawing ugly red lines across the stratosphere. She moved, recognizing its intents for what they were. Red burst, emerging from Senketsu's seams, pointed tips converging to protect instead of retaliate. Makeshift shield in hand, Satsuki somersaulted away, heels leaving deep indents upon weakened ground.

The orbs buzzed, ominously glowing a dull red. Fiber spheres slowly tracked her every move, orienting their speared ends in her direction before launching off. Guided missiles, they sped towards her, screaming as they whistled through the air, sleek points intent on boring straight through weak flesh. For her part, Satsuki continued to blaze past grasping vines, cloaked by the fading black remaining columns provided and weaving through their broken forms. She strikes, forcefully launching off crumbling plaster and streaking through the air as Bakuzan Kouryuu sings and decapitates its bitter foes, fighting from the shadows like she had done so long ago with her brainwashed sibling.

Her senses prickled, fine hairs on the back of her neck standing to attention. She inhaled sharply, instantly stiffening when she noted the air changed.

She moved, looking up just in time to see the first of many fall, generous brows knitting into a perfect line as shock gives way to annoyed scowls.

They connected with the ground mere centimeters from her heeled feet as they punch into the ground, detonating in violent explosions. Flames and fragmented debris licked at sprinting feet, heating clothed skin and almost seeming to burn right through the sleek material. Ten, twelve, two dozen missiles followed her, looping through the air and relentlessly pursuing her.

Left, right, left! Up the wall! Faster, faster!

Closer... they're getting closer...

At her feet, closing in! **20, 15, 10, 5... !**

Leap to the next tier! Jump! Jump! Go go gogogogogogogooooo!

Duck! Missile to your right! Evade evade evade!!!

Not enough space...

Oh god oh god oh god oh...

“Senketsu shippu!” Senketsu shouted suddenly, rocketing them both away and successfully breaking her out of her trance.

She hugged the primordial’s massive body, only breaking away when massive spikes formed at its surface and shot out towards her. They erupted, tapered points as thin as sewing needles shooting into existence in front of, behind, all around her in rapid succession.

Right, left, right, up! **Up, dammit!**

She could see her now, Ryuuko’s naked body limp and unresisting as the fiber god continued to twist its form around hers.

Almost there... *almost there... !*

A blip, a splatter of blue briefly flashed into existence, catching her eye. In that moment, she could see his moving shadow, prisms of light catching the low-poly edges of his cloak, the hacker in question blissfully unaware of the looming growth behind.

“Inumuta!”

Said Chair of Information and Strategy appeared before her, invisibility cloak shattered upon an errant vine’s strike, a chance brutal snap of corded fibers that sent him sprawling onto his back. Rubbing his sore spine, statistics and immeasurable amounts of calculated numbers were conjured, opaque glasses tilted towards the ascending rainbow stream. Conclusions arrived mere seconds later, he stared disbelievingly at the display, fellow rebels doing the same with varying expressions of shock.

“It’s too late. It’s starting,” Houka ominously intoned, head craning up further as the sea of data flew past his specs in rushing streams.

“The cocoon genesis,” Satsuki finished with a grimace, unadulterated horror running through chilled blood as the rainbow streak touched the sky and turned it a vibrant red upon contact, billions of clothing sets consuming their frightened, screaming wearers and sending them hurtling into the stratosphere, where they interwove and melded together to create a growing mesh.

Ryuuko struggled fruitlessly against her binds, overwhelming strength that could grind boulders into fine sand reduced to a mere fraction of what it was, her efforts as fruitful as trying to move the sun and moon.

But, as her shackles tightened painfully around her body and dug into her skin, something awoke - a simmering maelstrom that breathed and rejoiced in destruction, the overwhelming primal urge to rend. A raging fiend, it pounded against her temples, scratching away at the inside of her skull. And her head hurt, damn it, it hurt!

She felt rather than witnessed herself slipping, body starting to dance to an old master’s command once more. It pounced like savage beasts, forcing her into a corner. She pushed back, feeling herself become more drained the longer her attention was divided between threats both old and new. And for the briefest of seconds, her attention was drawn away, fear yanking it towards the more immediate task of life preservation when her moment of indecision nearly cost her her head. It reared up, slamming into her the same moment razor-edged tendrils swept past where her neck was a mere half-second ago, burying her under the throes of sickeningly-pleasurable submission, reminding her of the unmatched delight her body had under its influence.

Too late, too late, too late, toolate, toolatetoolatetoolate!

She despaired, feeling it probe her mind, soothingly stroking it as she continued to lose ground.

Give in , it whispered. *Give me your body, and I will give you my strength, my power.*

Give.

In.

To.

Me.

“No...” she groaned, only just managing to slip past its buffering offensive.

Straining, struggling against the current that slammed against her with the force of a rushing train, she reached out. Fingers grasping at nothing save for whorling eddies that threatened to push her off the edge, she pushed onward, the tell-tale tail of white dancing in the far reaches of her vision.

A little more... Just a little more...

The trailing end drew close, so tantalizingly close.

Closer... closer...

There!

She panted in triumph, a breathless pant that was uttered freely in relief when the very tips of her fingers brushed against its ethereal presence and dug in, latching on. They melded, her hand blending into its ragged trailing ends.

She gasped as pure power flooded into her, surging and bringing vigor to exhausted muscles. Shakily, her hands lifted, trembling digits wrapping around the lance that tethered her to that monster, snapping her eyes shut and gritting her teeth as she clenched, as she pulled and yanked and screamed as bits of her flesh were removed with that damned barb.

They parted in a flash of light, the tendrils ripping away from her in a single, powerful motion that left her feeling empty inside, as if the entire contents of her brain were brutally yanked out. Hacking up a glob of blood, she spat it at the ground, wiping away dribbling lengths of red left upon her chin. Knees pushed off where they sat within craters of their own making, toes curling under feet and lifting them off rocky ground. Thunder clapped as she bellowed loudly her defiance, hands reaching up without her willingly directing them to ruthlessly clench the fibers that held them paralyzed and wrench them from her skin in a single savage movement. Ground cracked as her legs kicked out from under her and shot her into the sky, vines sprouting from a battle-scarred back to wrap around the few paltry remains of the auditorium's columns. She hissed as more barbed fibrils approached, gear-rimmed pupils burning a faint orange as inhuman eyes glared with a cunning gleam, a mean intelligence that grudgingly worked in series with its host's.

Ryuuko dived as lances shot with every intent to bore straight through her head, pouncing upon the coiling, retreating mass when they reared back to strike again. Running along its length on all fours, she grinned ferally even as it shook violently in useless attempts to dislodge her, swords glinting malevolently in the primordial being's amber light. She reared up. Arms became a tornado of slashing red, vast swathes of tortile filaments raining upon consecrated ground.

Rage flaring deep within dilated lenses, she roared, taking off into the skies once more.

“By my calculations, the signal the primordial life fiber used Matoi to trigger shouldn’t affect more than two hundred kilometers. **But**, it appears that the signal frequencies its sending varies greatly from the one Matoi emitted.”

“And what is that supposed to mean!?”

A scoff, an irritated twitch of brows. “It means, my short-tempered snake, that not only had it used Matoi to transmit the awakening signal, but her innate fibers were being taken advantage of to change the signal itself so that it triggers any COVERS or life fiber-infused clothing nearby outside their range, very much like a communications system, albeit with a greatly reduced effect area. However, given that the majority of the world still is clothed and grouped together in safe zones, it’s just enough to carry them to -”

“Speak Japanese, dog!”

“In *other* words, it used Matoi’s ability to evolve to evolve as well! She’s forced to use the Absolute Domination she got from absorbing Shinra Kouketsu, it modifies the signal so that those affected will transmit a much weaker signal in response. A ripple effect. Just enough to ensure enough hosts are captured to complete the cocoon genesis.”

Satsuki nodded grimly, face contorting into bitter disgust as the very fact it continued to use and violate her sister for its own gain smacked her right in the face. The soft pad of toes lightly striking the space nearby caught her attention. Turning her head to acknowledge Ryuuko as she dropped from her perch to meet them, a blood-coated hand soothingly nursed a sore neck, sharp eager inhales of breath between grit teeth all but confirming her lively resilience even after ripping out her nervous system twice in a day. The curt nod she directed at the younger sibling all but masked the deep worry she had, anxiety’s talons still firmly grasping her intestines and twisting them about its filthy nails even after she straightened up and flashed a cocky grin in her direction, soon departing again in a great explosion of dust and white powder.

‘I thought...’ she selfishly thinks, watching as Ryuuko swoops low and slides along vast networks of vines to Mako’s side *‘I truly thought I lost you again...’*

Their eyes meet as Ryuuko briefly glances over her shoulder, shared resolve roaring deep in their chests as a bonafide inferno. It gave her all the more inspiration to continue this herculean task, this sisyphean endeavor that wagered seven billion lives between two parties.

“Listen up!” She shouted, long strands of her hair whirling about in a single great wave as she turned to address all her subordinates. “The cocoon genesis may have started, but this isn’t over! The sky is still at large, free! The Earth is still in one piece! We are still here! We are not defeated! We are still its last hope, for the hope of all mankind and the fate of the planets that lie outside ours! We will not give up! We will not surrender! We will overcome and overpower! We! Will! Be! Triumphant!”

Her Elites, pausing where they stood, felt the power behind their leader’s words and took them to heart, allowing them to strike them to their very souls and resonate with them. Change them. Empower them.

A smile graces Satsuki’s lips as she watches her four stand tall despite the crippling injuries each one of them suffered, pain forgotten in the face of their commander’s radiance. She watches as they ready their weapons and uniforms once more, trembling slightly in the presence of a god. They were anxious and scared, yes, but they were eager - as they should be even when faced with an insurmountable foe.

“For freedom!”

“For humanity!”

Hearts beating as one, they charged, defiant battle cries deafening in the god-fiber’s chamber.

Mako carefully inched her head away from cover, trying to get a proper look around it. She had to quickly duck back though, her efforts being rewarded with the shrieking missiles that streaked way too close to her face for comfort. Fingers carefully danced around another golden weapon of her choosing.

COVERS swooped overhead, drawing close... ever so close... tuning into the rapidly-beating mess that was her pounding heartbeat, the rhythm that turned her blood hot, churned it wild and frothing. They hovered, at once speeding towards her little hideout the second they saw a tiny sliver of her cloak peek out the den of fallen beams and crumbled rock.

Trap, surround, and murder her. That was their plan and she wasn't doing anything to stop them.

Mako glared defiantly up at suited, mindless monsters. She was more than a mere high school student trapped in the throes of poverty and cast into an academic institution that seemed way too keen on murdering them every other day for minor infractions. During that, she was a promising ally to Ryuuko’s cause to take down the person she thought knew who murdered her father - another girl like her who was unwittingly drafted to be trained in the use of weapons and life fibers to become a formidable fighter. As witness to her friend’s descent and ascents, split-second strategies and thoughts and was as much of a participant in them as Senketsu was, she was leagues above any typical club member that challenged her for her kamui on a daily basis. She lived through hell every day, sallying through it with a

cheerful smile and a deceptively brainless facade. And now, she was a soldier in a war she didn't know she signed up for, fighting against clothing itself.

'But...' She thought, turning over cleavers and machetes and all sorts of spiked and nail-embedded weapons over her palm, brushing over their bodies from where they were tied to her impressive cloak, *'...If Ryuuko was able to take them out so easily, she could do the same.'*

Readying herself, she charged from her hiding spot, launching herself to the high heavens above.

The COVERS paused in their descent, fibers and lace streaming from their mouths as tendrils felt the empty air underneath the crumbled wreck in confusion. Human prey was here, right in this very spot. Human prey was hiding here until just a split-second ago. Surely it couldn't have just disappeared, right? Together, they chattered amongst themselves in silent bewilderment, pant hems dragging across filthy gravel underneath as they practically were on top of the rubble pile.

That was, until what appeared to be a meteor slammed into the ground before them, tearing away great chunks of the white material in an instant and blowing them away like leaves in the wind. As poor of a fire-starter as concrete was, an inferno seemed to lick the stone, heat stretching across the vast space until it seemed to heat the entire area up by a few degrees like a convection oven. A fiery blaze ripped through the empty air, ember spectacularly breaking off a caped body as it straightened, earthen eyes glaring at living suits beneath a thick-billed cap as one of their comrades fruitlessly struggled underneath her feet.

That intense gaze searched for a proper victim, the no-star craning her neck and tilting her chin as if to better inspect her hapless foes. They were created without mind or capacity of complex thought, but the sheer brutality their prey exhibited... this awesome show of power... this was no ordinary human. Perhaps they possessed an instinctive understanding how truly and royally *fucked* they were, for such a display temporarily shocked them into stunned inaction.

One of the decently sized pack members seemed to shake out of its stupor, turning about face to meet her intense glare head on.

And foolishly, it decided to rush her, jagged jaws agape in futile hope of being able to devour her fast enough to render this threat null and void.

One punch was all it took. One punch straight to its core fibers was all it took to destroy its loosely-knit form, to undo the weaves the primordial being created, to reduce it to twitching, white threads.

The clover crunched gently between her teeth. Mako pulled back a brass knuckle-clad fist, a guilty but macabre stab of excitement rushing through her when she saw how easily it crumpled under her might, its brethren seeming to recoil in horror at such a display.

The rest of the pack rose up after a moment's hesitation, instantly dispersing in a great cloud around her, hoping to flank and overwhelm her with their numbers. And with a great hiss of

air, they charged.

The first that reached her met its end with a club that suddenly found itself in her palm, the blunt weapon twirled between fingers much too soft to have been from a life-long battle against faceless enemies, but life at Honnouji Academy had prepared her this much for resolutely staring death down time and time again - all was fair game in a global war, after all. The second found its snapping jaws clamped shut with a ferocious squeeze of those same fingers reaching out and clenching its parted seams, her wrist twisting and forcing it to brutally slam into its neighbor. The fourth and fifth were literally knocked out of the citadel, bodies twisting into as much of a show of surprise as their expressionless forms allowed, threads that held their forms tethered to their life-force and progenitor snapping the disturbed air in loud, successive cracks.

The rest took their cue to flee, to retreat back into the shadows where more of their unawakened brethren would come to life and aid them.

Now glaring daggers at the massive orb that callously threatened humanity, she tracked its swaying branches with calculating eyes, rocketing into the air at the same moment a thick vine slammed at her feet and tried to splatter her across its chamber walls. It screeched as she forcefully impacted its flailing appendage, running up its serpentine body and stubbornly progressing further up its length no matter how many spears or missiles or COVERS it lobbed her way.

She cocked an arm, slamming repeatedly into the base of the limb that tried conjoining her body to roughened stone until sizeable cracks started to form at its hardened shell. Leaping away as another vine irritably swatted at her, she repeated the process for the next couple she saw, always stopping when she broke halfway through.

A triumphant grin, and she kicked off the bloated god as it rolled over, movements painfully slow despite the massive amounts of people it absorbed, landing on the ground in a crouch. A puff of air rippled the heavy cloak that sat on her shoulders, a kiss of chilled currents that set her body aglow in warmth. Without turning to look at the newcomer, she nodded resolutely, plans and ideas exchanged without either of them needing to say a word.

She knew what she wanted.

She purposely backed up into Ryuuko, the latter grabbing hold of her and, cranking her living missile back, lobbed her straight towards the wounded god. Her name-emblazoned brass knuckles smashed into its front, mirroring twins of “MAKO” and “OKAM” neatly printed in gruesomely deep detail across its face.

Pumping her fists, she pushed off once more, managing to touch down on the perfect spot to see her handiwork in action, for the primordial being hovering mere meters above them was suddenly losing its ability to effectively fight back. Cracks raced along the base, splitting at the god’s messily bundled seams and penetrating far past the immediate area where its grown branches protruded from, the vines themselves noisily detaching from their master to fall in great crumbling heaps below.

Another burst of wind, and Ryuuko was behind her once more, waiting for her to move again so she could take advantage of its agitation to lop off more of its seemingly-endless limbs. She licked her lips, popping each individual knuckle with hollow bony *clicks* . She raised a foot again, intending on dealing it yet another blow, when...

“Hurk!”

... She looked down, surprised when orange was where black and white were supposed to be.

The last thought she had before gold-coated weapons slipped free from slackened hands was idle astonishment that the human blood could hold so much blood.

“Hurk!”

Warmth splattered across her face, sticky and coppery in nature. Red spilled down softened inclines upon her face and pooled at the chin, where it painted dark lines down her neck and between her collarbones.

Ryuuko stared.

She sat there shell shocked, mouth agape as an arcing splash inadvertently found its way into her mouth. A tongue shot out of reflex, lapping away at the smearing red. She froze. Realization's full weight bearing down upon her as did the latent kamui's consciousness.

Blood.

Mako's, to be exact.

The no-star in question stood stunned, multiple vines spearing through her stomach and protruding through her back, no move made to struggle or even attempt to free herself.

She blinked.

And suddenly, something clicked.

Like a triggered switch, her senses sharpened. Colors became supersaturated, even the duller of shadows painted over with painfully bright hues. Lines sharpened, fine details turning bold and blaring as if a thickened brush had ran over them. Her head jerked to attention, the heartbeats of everyone in the room suddenly becoming deafening, the minute changes in pressure as the life-blood running within their bodies easily discernible even to her untrained ear. And most of all, she could hear the electrical buzz of life fibers, of the very *heart* of the thing pulsing and throbbing, visions of clenching it in blood-coated hands and squeezing it into smithereens consuming her.

Enamel crunched, fangs tearing through delicate flesh to cleanly protrude through a lip. Red filled her vision. A light, airy voice talking at the back of her mind grew stronger, its advances becoming more appealing with every passing second. Rage, trilling high and sharp in her ears, filling her with the irresistible urge to maim, to kill, to *destroy*. The same calm, collected voice urging it on, relishing in the churning, bubbling mix of volatile emotions as more life fibers descended from the heavens to snugly wrap around her frozen form, to cocoon and devour her whole.

'It used us!'

Yes, it did.

'It hurt Mako!'

And it will hurt many more.

“REAAAARRRGHH!”

Memories flashed before her eyes, heated images of the countless hours they spent together galvanizing her muscles into action. Cracks filled the air as threads snapped in a single concerted movement, crudely broken by sheer will alone. Satsuki looked up just in time to see a smear of red burst free and blow past her, catching the Nudists in tornado-strength gusts following in her wake. Ryuuko charged on all fours, concrete tearing itself to pieces and kicked high in the air with every footfall. She leapt, a crimson streak screaming through empty space and violently clashing against the fiber-spears that streaked towards her, adrenaline singing high, singing shrilly, deafeningly grating against her mind like an orchestral crescendo.

Mako collapsed. Hands darted out like a sparrow's flight, snatching their target before her knees struck the ground. In great bounds, she retreated, skidding to a halt behind the protective line looping trigger-wires created. Fangs bared in snarled hisses, white-hot hatred centered upon the primordial being. Gently, she laid her upon the ground in front of the hulking giant, defensively standing before the recouping group on all fours.

All she could smell was hot metal, ichor so freshly spilt and so carelessly wasted. All she could hear was the odd buzzing the orbs made, the mindless chatter the thousands of forcefully assimilated humans made within the fibered abomination. She saw nothing but its hovering form, felt nothing but raw, murderous anger that threatened to devour, anger that broke free of its restraints and swallowed her whole with one snap of its great maw.

And in that moment, she honestly couldn't give a damn. In fact, she welcomed it with open arms, an uncontrollable inferno sparked deep within at the sight of her bloodied and deathly still adoptive sister and friend, the sounds of her strained, barely-there breathing.

Air buzzed in visible distortions, waves of enraged heat rolling off her body as it suddenly relaxed. Slowly, hesitantly, a hand covered in the girl's blood was brought to her face. Deep merlot caught golden yellow, the liquid ominously swishing within her palm, pooling in its cupped depths and slowly oozing past creased lines. It moved. Streaks of bright burgundy suddenly appeared on a glowering face to compliment the similar shade accenting about her

eyes, droplets of freshly spilt ichor painted in four brashly drawn lines across her cheeks. The sharp scent of blood filled her nose, coppery tang awakening senses dormant and wildness untamed. Sangria flashed, glimmers of vibrant mahogany twitching within vast white depths.

The last time such a fierce expression rested on her face was in the immediate aftermath of Junketsu wearing her.

Senketsu blinked, unsettled by her sudden transformation, shivers racing through his being. "...R-Ryuuko...?"

Following Satsuki's sudden shift in posture, the rebels turned to peer at her at well, a medley of confused expressions soon replaced by abject horror. Ryuuko looked back at them. Locking gazes, a sly, wicked smile grew upon her cheeks, corners seemingly stretching to reach mischievous, slitted eyes. Skin turned ashen, pale, covered in a slick layer of freezing sweat that seemed to intensify the longer she stared back with cold, calculating eyes. She cocked her head, slowly raising the ichor-soaked hand once more to lap scarlet liquid away as the air surrounding her suddenly became freezing, moisture crystallizing into frozen droplets and drawn breaths soon misting in her presence.

She observed their stunned expressions, savoring their fear with idle passes of a tongue over chapped lips. A low, perpetually pleased purr rumbled from deep within her chest, fingers experimentally flexing and curling into loose fists.

She moved, body seemingly teleporting across the far reaches of the vast space in lieu of entertaining their sudden cries of shock. A gymnast on uneven bars, she grappled outstretched branches, swinging upon them and catapulting upward. Higher and higher she ascended, an eagle soaring on warm updrafts, until she cleared the tops of the orange forest, grinning manically even as a hail of detonations lit up the space behind her, shrapnel peppering her flesh all the while.

She slammed against its shell in a crouch, a curled fist slowly lifting off hardened shielding to shake loose pieces of embedded shards. A tousled mane of navy moved, regarding the floating spheres with a devious smirk. She leapt as soon as they locked on her, hooting gleefully when they collided behind her, plumes of heat and burning fibers brushing by her bare skin as she rocketed past.

Mako unsteadily rose into a half-sitting position, carefully shifting her weight so that it lay on her hips and elbows. An unpleasant coppery tang wafted across her nose, the doctor's daughter scrunching her nose in disgust. She'd seen some pretty gruesome things when patients came into her dad's clinic, but seeing holes bored into one's stomach was a completely alien experience from actually having them. Her two-star uniform shuddered, only just able to fend off the lethal blow with the small spurts of power it fed into her agonized body. It could hold her off from death now, but any more damage, and it would be obliterated and leave its wounded wearer completely vulnerable.

Gamagoori flitted in the edges of her vision, standing guard over her recovering body as his uniform did battle with the primordial. Dazed and struck with the curious sensation that her limbs didn't seem to be her own anymore, she raised an arm, holding a hand to bleeding flesh as red streamed past her fingers. She blinked, smearing the sticky substance across her bruising body.

Her stomach rolled, warmth splattering across the tattered remnants of her uniform top as protesting flesh stung.

“MANKANSHOKU!” Gamagoori trumpeted, raising a hand to block out a whip as it lashed towards him with every intent to cleave him in two. “Are you okay!?”

She managed to nod, cap messily falling onto her face and obscuring her vision. She shook her head to move it away, immediately regretting it as her vision spun again and the contents of her stomach threatened to empty. All she could see was orange and more orange, yellow and... red... ?

“Ryuu... ko...?” she murmured slowly, as if having recently woken from a dream.

“Ryuuko...”

She blinked as her eyes finally focused on the scarlet streak, the fog clouding her mind instantly dissipating.

“Ryuuko!”

Well, she knew her overconfidence was going to bite her in the ass someday. She just didn't expect it to be here of all places by a giant glorified ball of yarn, instead of at the hands of some cocky asshole like Sanageyama.

The first thing she felt was the sensation of a sharp object sliding past delicate tissue. Then, the pain, burning white in her battered mind, stinging acridly at the spot where her bang parted flesh, the wound so freshly healed and unbearably sensitive.

Ah, fuck.

"It's over, Kiryuuin!" It roared victoriously, exultation soon cut short when the lance slid well past the flesh of her throat, the impromptu dagger suddenly falling limp when the girl *vanished* from sight in the blink of an eye, with only the slick wet squelch of her pierced neck sliding off its crude dagger and the smear of dark red blood the only indicators she had ever been there.

“Yeah,” she taunted, grinning savagely as blood splattered from the still-closing wound and decorated its fiery orange surface with scarlet mist, “For you,”

Claws raked against the armored surface, a bloodied trisected plate of elongated bone and hardened red fibers protruding from snow-pale flesh scoring gouges deep into its shell. She

swooped low, pivoting off an extended hand and using it to spring above barbed defenses.

"Using your fused kamui!?" it hissed incredulously.

"Something like that..." she shrugged, not bothering to hide bold red streaks tracing fiery trails across her face, their tailed ends growing longer and more ornate, weaving underneath ruddy skin, the faint tremors that wracked her agonized body growing ever so prominent with the passing of the seconds as she barely held herself together in the face of two familiar foes...

Now awed, its attacks redoubled. *"I'll be sure to dissect your body thoroughly, then. Such an amazing specimen shouldn't be completely wasted."*

A fiber spear shot out, mere inches from her face in the blink of an eye. Unimpressed, she merely raised an arm, unflinchingly letting it spear through a wrist and firmly lodge within the tissue, not flinching in the slightest as it tore through tendons and shifted bones.

She clenched her teeth, wrapping fingers around the strip and tugging harshly. Muscles strained, pulsing veins brought to the surface and rippling as an impromptu session of tug of war was initiated between them - one that swiftly ended when the god fiber abruptly yanked her into the air and wrapped a good length of itself around her neck in a readily-made noose and another portion around her wrists.

Bringing her down to what could be considered its eye level, it could not help but gloat. *"Perhaps you remember this? Does a certain... festival... remind you of anything, hmm? Dangled helplessly above by a certain someone you once held in high regard?"*

"Bitch..." Ryuuko cursed underbreath, wriggling within its grasp, struggling and straining and all the while cursing how such a tiny thread could cripple her so.

"Perhaps a repeat performance of her mind stitching would do you good, now that you have no hope of ever escaping our grasp. Forever. But... we have decided that your mental capacities are no longer needed. So, without further ado..."

Twin points raised, crossing over each other and speeding towards her neck.

"Goodbye, Ryuuko Kiryuuin."

Shit shit shitshitshit!

The air changed, curling around the approaching fibers as they sought to scissor her head off in the most thematically gruesome death they thought possible.

Come on!

Bare feet kicked out, scrabbling along the orange vine's trailing body, toes barely managing to cling to its loosely constructed weave. She kicked out again, clutching a wad between clumsy digits and hastily yanking herself towards it.

TSEW!

Ryuuko hissed as they slashed clean through her jugulars, blood flowing freely down her front as she coughed and sputtered great globules of dark red liquid, the primordial being tsking in disappointment.

"Ah. If you only had held still, your death may have been relatively painless. Let's try again, shall we?"

"Screw that," she snarled, fingers straining under orange wrapping to even remotely shift their mass off a scissor blade.

The pads of her fingers trembled, rising mere hair-widths off the polished handle off her favored sword. Knuckles softly ground against their bindings, knurling and kneading until...

Just a little more...

There!

Scarlet plunged, Ryuuko crying out in excruciating agony as she willingly let her own weapon impale her foot and then some. The fibers within glowed, paper thin networks of interconnected threads coming to life underneath paled skin. Leg shakily rising, she forced it to swing wide, catching the very edge of her tormentor by its tip. It buckled, crumpling over as threads snapped and the vine withered. She repeated the action as soon as the pendulum-swing accidentally brought her even closer to its body, hooting as it snapped completely.

She landed on a tier nearby, slowly pulling the sword out of her foot by the handle and giving the god-fiber a wicked, conniving grin. "Now then, how should I go about personally disemboweling you?"

Dull anger at memories past came back with a vengeance, feeding into her mind in continuous streams of the injustices this ball of fibers not even fit to bear its supposed title foisted upon her. It crept to the forefront of her thoughts, goaded on by the invisible presence living within and willingly received by her heart as the urge to rend, the urge to rip and tear it apart until nothing was left pumping through heated blood.

Her world went red.

She slashed repeatedly at its body, taking pleasure in its agonized groans as she tore at the fiber bundles dotting its skin, slamming crossed scissor blades against the rounded protrusions that started to bud at its surface when it tried lobbing more of its missiles at her. She honestly didn't give a damn if she caught them too late and they exploded in her face, however; now awakened and pushed to their limit, her fiber-infused skin practically healed all burns instantly, licking over reddened flesh and undoing even those that would be considered life threatening to normal people. Its body swayed, a powerful monster now reduced to a hapless ball of yarn trying to shake off the equivalent of a biting fly from its body.

She was wild, a feral grin, shrunken pupils, jagged horns and bones rising from bleeding flesh, and even wilder red streaks turning her into something akin to an oni of legends. Logic was swiftly pushed out the window the longer she fought, the longer the voice whispering

into her ears rewarded and encouraged her excessively violent thoughts and actions - all that mattered was hacking and slashing away at its body, ripping it limb for limb in more inventively torturous ways as payback.

She cackled in pure delight as calloused hands grasped a whip as it tried to knock out her legs from under her, hefting it over a shoulder and pulling and tugging until the ugly sound of tearing seamwork filled her heart with glee. A lance thrust towards her, swiping low at her back and slicing through toned flesh like hot knives through butter, only stopping when native fibers within the delinquent's body suddenly hardened around it, trapping it between her spine and healing sides. Bones snapped as her neck completed a near 180 degree swivel, a mad laugh ridiculing its pathetic attempts at killing her. For this, she dug clawed digits into its mass, fiber-covered fingerbones breaching skin and rushing forward into the orange mass to infiltrate deep within its core, hardened threads parting from bloody ivory to tear at the fiber-whip out from the inside out. She pulled and lodged finger-knives deeper, the sweet melody of snapping threads and its pained yowl goading her on.

"And this..." she whispered, ripping her hand out of the dying vine and catching another as it started to hastily retreat from her sight. "... is for Mako."

Just as it started to slide into the frantically squirming bundle, a single chiming note alike the peal of crystal bells rang out, the hum of resonating frequencies buzzing low, humming soothingly in her ear. And as if drawn to the sound, all heads and attentions turned, focused on the spotlight that shone intensely upon crossed wrists, to the one boldly standing underneath its luminous body, wrists crossed in a broken but resilient hallelujah.

The first thing she did was squint at that familiar form, trying to divine whether it was actually her friend or just another illusion and, no, she wasn't imagining it; she was there! Bent-kneed and woozy, standing with her club as a makeshift cane, but gloriously and undeniably breathing!

She was **alive!**

Ryuuko released the limb, all-consuming rage within dissipated in a finger-snap and the hybrid's voice practically exploding with relief. "M-Mako!"

"Ryuuko!"

She jumped down in a crack of thunder, thrusting her naked body under hers and scooping her up into a bear hug, not caring in the slightest when her blood-covered body was painted in five more swathes of carmine. The brunette practically vibrated in her arms, her normally boisterous and welcome greetings hampered by the unfortunate holes bored through her body. And yet, the two's rejoicing was not diminished, not affected by such a thing - in fact, it intensified it, knowing how resilient they were, clinging to life by the very tips of their stubborn teeth.

"C'mon," the no-star beamed, wincing when her ribs didn't appreciate the sudden movements of her arms to better brace themselves against the hybrid. "They're waiting for us."

Sanageyama rubbed his jaw, groaning as what felt like a thousand roundhouse kicks to the face smarted along its reddened length. “Oh, man, I feel like I got Hadoke’s thousand-ball serve. Times ten. ...Thousand. And we haven’t even gotten that far in taking it down. How’re we doing with time?”

“Not very good. By extrapolating sensory data for carbon monoxide and hydrogen cyanide, we can infer that we only have five minutes maximum at most until smoke toxicity levels have reached a critical level - where we can be instantly knocked out if we even took one or two breaths from it. I already requested Nudist Beach to set up charges around the exterior mansion walls to help with venting so we can safely escape this deathtrap, but obviously that’s only going to make the inferno progress faster.”

“We need something... Something that can penetrate its shell.”

“The ship,” Satsuki answered immediately, swiftly leaning back to let a whipping fibril fly past harmlessly. “If it was powerful enough to easily break Ragyou’s Absolute Domination, perhaps using the mounted cannons would be able to damage it enough to expose its core.”

“Unlikely.” Houka sighed. “Visual observations estimate the relative thickness of its coating well past anything we currently have to penetrate its shell in the small time frame we have. Even in our current state, the force of colliding the Naked Sol’s entire armory against it would do nothing more than bounce off at the least, crack it at the very most.”

An exasperated huff, Uzu rubbing sore muscles. “Well, I got nothing. Any suggestions are welcome.”

Ryuuko looked up at the crumbling ceiling, gears slowly turning in her mind. She smirked, voice low. “I got another idea. We’re gonna use that ship to - ”

Houka’s forehead solidly met his palm. “I just *told* you - . ”

“We’re gonna do more than *that* ,” two fingers in a curled hand ticked upward before pointing down towards a toothy smile, thumb jerking in the floating god’s direction. The hand curled, splayed, then curled again, low throaty crackles resembling radio static accompanying the action.

“Oh?” blue eyes squinted behind polished red lenses, an odd sense of awe filling him once he followed her fingers to the ‘X’ crudely gouged upon its enormous swollen body - the one that built off the impressive damage the no-star brawler managed to do in such a short period of time - and understood. “Ah. Very clever, Matoi.”

Patting down near-invisible pockets, he withdrew a familiar, black object, tossing it over to the curiously onlooking hybrid.

She caught it easily in a hand, looking its slightly cracked form over in absolute bewilderment. “... eh?”

“Wear this. You are the only available candidate to go retrieve the Naked Dagger, seeing as your temporary possession by Junketsu showed that your body is able to withstand long periods of time without oxygen, and the upper floors will be completely filled with toxic gas.”

Calloused hands secured the bead to an ear, brushing stray hairs behind her nape. “Okay, and... ?”

“I’ll be able to direct your actions. If what the both of us are thinking is true... we’ll need it.”

She ran towards Satsuki, the latter hunching over and laying her hands atop each other, gaze a firm sapphire. A bare heel connected with black gloved palms, and the elder thrust her up with a powerful fling, sending her far into the empty space above and breaking the sound barrier for the umpteenth time that day. Ryuuko swiped at its edges, the familiar weight of gravity starting to pull at her once more, a heavy weight that latched onto her torso and pulled the rest of her down with it.

Three... two...

She swung out, barely managing to grip onto the crumbling plaster by the skin of her teeth.

CRRRAAAAACK!

“ARGH! Son of a bitch!”

Fingernails bled, nails nearly ripped from their beds. Feet scraped at the indented surface, clawing for purchase. Fiber lines lamely shot from torn flesh, desperately grasping onto loose columns as much as their limp, featureless forms allowed.

CRUNCH

“Shit !”

She fell, arms weakly outstretched to the heavens above as the facade crumbled beneath her fingers, shattering at feet as Gamagoori was unwittingly flung towards her.

For a moment, she twisted about midair, relegated to watching the window of opportunity slip further and further past her grip.

A fist clenched, fanged teeth flashing in the glowing light.

No.

Loose orange vines wrapped around a curved handle, delinquent owner yanking it back with a fluid jerk.

The scissor flew, cast like a fisherman's pole as it carved a path through the air, slamming into the darkened recesses above.

She latched onto the upper tiers, gripping onto crumbling alabaster facades by those fine points. Panting, she heaved herself over, narrowing her eyes at the great domed ceiling above her, where dozens of pillars convened to form elegant patterns upon its plaster cladding, all depicting the ascendance of man through the assistance of the celestial fibers. Lowly apes, fur spiked with ominous red material, crawling on the ground and desiring nothing more than another day spent fighting for existence rather than being torn apart between the jaws of savage animals. Neanderthals, dim-witted excuses of pre-human species clad in ragged strips of glowing cloth, grunting and hefting their clubs, clumsily attempting to figure out the most basic of tools for survival. Humanity in its infancy, stumbling through dark ages and enlightenments in distant pasts - all the while as their more luxuriously-clad counterparts ruled over their paltry lives. And now, splotches resuming Kiryuuin caretakers on their knees and elbows, tending to the fibers. Feeding them. Strengthening them. Throwing their lives away for the sake of an apocalyptic future they endlessly prayed would pass.

An angry snarl flitted across her face then, rage bubbling in her veins as the past weeks of blissful servitude slammed against her mind once, twice, bringing a disgusting mix of feelings to the surface.

Destroy it all.

Her blades extended, trembling in white-knuckled hands.

The ancient image was rent asunder in three brutal swipes, each one more devastating than the last. Painted rock fell in fine chunks.

Her chest heaved, labored pants wracking her form.

Time to end everything.

Heels pushed off the smooth surface soundlessly, rocketing her up into the far reaches of the space above. A crow flying in the darkened skies, she flitted into the gaping hole, becoming one with the shadows.

Satsuki jetted higher in the air, exchanging knowing nods with Nonon as they flew in unison. Intertwining streaks of pink danced in tandem with those of scarlet red, the elder scoring cuts in the primordial's shell with trailing blades, with the pinkette following after. Heat and

violent plumes of red burst from their efforts, pride blossoming in their chests when they saw the extent of their damage growing rapidly under their hands.

Houka swiftly sliced at an approaching COVER, multipurpose wires shooting from wrist-mounted reserves. “Matoi, you’re going to want to head down to the lower decks. It should be the one with a long gray streak painted across the walls.”

“Everything’s gray!” she grumbled back in a chirp of static, metal twisting gratingly in his ear as she tore through yet another deck. “I can’t see a thing!”

“Keep looking!” he urged. “They should be in sealed white packets.”

Another screech of metal, this time in multiple bursts as the hybrid wisely decided ‘fuck it’ and tore through all floors at once. Feet slapped against cold steel as she cleared the ship from end to end in efficient swipes of her blade, the magnificent lack of bulkhead walls the scissor pair created making her task so much easier. “... Alright, I think I found the armory.”

“Good work. Now, there should be several heavily sealed doors containing secured palettes -” he abruptly broke off as a godawful ***SCRREEEEEE*** decided it was a perfect time to make itself known. “... guess I should have expected that you wouldn’t have waited.”

“Can’t afford to do that crap. There’s like, ten of these things here. Ones with green...? Gray...? I don’t know what colors these are... ah... harnesses?”

“Yes, those!” he panted triumphantly, tearing another suit to scrap cloth. “It should be relatively simple to set up. Just follow the instructions I’m going to give you in a moment, pack them around the bow, set the detonator to the prescribed frequency printed, and we should be in the clear.”

Instructions soon relayed amid demands to slow down and repeat himself and a new dictionary of inventive swears Matoi employed that dwarfed the repositories of even those of a certain pink snake safely stored away in his mind, he rejoined his comrades, nodding conspiratorially at them.

“Gentlemen, and Jakuzure, shall we unveil our trump card?”

Receiving nothing but assorted smirks, they sprang up as one body, dropping into place and neatly slotting into formation in complete synchrony.

“Toad!”

“Monkey!”

“Dog!”

“Snake!”

“Final transformation: Ultimate Grand Finale!”

The primordial life fiber was struck down once more as it attempted to rise, a brilliant combination of pink and green, blue and yellow hues overwhelming the giant. A well-oiled machine, they struck concussive blows - all focused on the sizable gashes their no-star counterparts made, seemingly able to communicate with each other without looking, each member swapping out for another as soon as the last attacking deva was chased away. And within a mere minute of them starting their work, the fissure had grown considerably, deepening and further paring back protective armor to reveal the softer flesh underneath. More and more of its shelling was shattered under their skillful blows, easily driving its attention away from the one fighter that should have been by all rights the most notable presence in the room.

In their absorption with their work upon the fiber-god's main body, however, they failed to recognize its manipulation of the much smaller orbs that dotted its form. That is, until Ira was crushed into the walling by them, the rest of the three following suit soon after. Now grounded after they were pelted by the blunted weapons at least the size of five tractor-trailers stacked atop each other, they groaned wearily, bodies dotted with in various bruises and gashes.

“Urgh... Is Matoi done yet?”

Wincing in pain, Inumuta struggled to unwedge an arm out from under his crumpled body and tapped against the broken communicator, rewarded only with white noise. “Matoi, come in! ...Matoi!”

With all three uniformed elites incapacitated and now in a wonderfully convenient spot, it grasped their uniforms, fiber spears embedding deep into their weave. They yelped, fiber bands pulling and yanking and tearing them away. A single snap and a burst of repressed pressure as their transformations were suddenly ripped away, and they were again once naked and vulnerable as the day they were born, fiber limbs hastily swarming over their tattered remains in desperate attempts to siphon their remaining power.

The primordial slashed out again, the devas crying in horror as they tried rolling out of its path, only for it to follow them closely and cut into their skin. They scrambled in three different directions - something it expected by the herding maneuvers it used with its few remaining limbs to trap, to pin them into a corner until the fires of their own making smothered the life from their lungs.

What it didn't expect, however, was the forty thousand tons of metal to crash against it.

Ryuuko fell from the sky, screaming bloody murder. In upstretched hands, the reinforced bow of the carrier ship rested comfortably, clawed fingers digging deeply into its hull. In a single, fluid motion, she wrenched them back before slamming the vessel against the primordial's crown, relishing in the gruesome crack newly-formed fissures made with an open mouthed smile. They fell together, the five still underneath the primordial's massive body scattering as it collided against the ground, impact sending titanic clods of rebar and stone flying and driving a crater five meters deep of its own design.

A primal, animalistic screech shook loose shards of decorative plaster, its sharp, pained cries otherworldly in nature. The ship held fast, however, sharpened bow lodged deep within the

massive gouged 'x' carved within its bulky defenses earlier.

Ryuuko touched down beside them, panting in exertion and trading a quick thumbs-up with the resident technician as he tapped and pecked at his spare PDA, the black device dented and chipped in many places with the prolonged battle, but still hard at work. Within seconds, the mansion shook as a rippling explosion ripped through it, ancient stonework reduced to pebbles and dust.

"That would be Nudist Beach. We should be able to navigate through the rest of the manor - the north and west wings should be entirely open to vent the smoke and ensure we escape safely. All we have to do is wait for the -" A chirp on Inumuta's device all but confirmed the established connection, soon flashing red as built-in chemical sensors were triggered. "Ah, good! I've got the ship's charges online!" Rapidly scanning the blinking screen's output, his voice became laced with fear as a scrolling set of numbers increased far too rapidly for comfort. "Everyone! We need to go - now! Toxic smoke levels rising to critical levels!"

Satsuki nods, effortlessly allowing her voice to fill the vast chamber. "Retreat! Clear the area!"

The primordial lashed out at this, despair reaching a crescendo as it tried to comprehend how seven mere *humans* had caused so much trouble, how these *insects* not worthy of being worn by their clothing brought about its downfall. It screamed with rage unparalleled, reaching out with great hands to snatch the heiress midair before she could land. Loops tightened, threads snagging to tie limbs taut and stretching across her skin, digging into the kamui and beginning to pull the sleek black material of its body back. Fibers strained under the sudden stress, threads thinning and starting to snap.

"Senketsu!"

They desynchronized in a flash - the desperate undoing of their closest bond forcing the deity to hold them away at arms length as released energy slashed back. Suspender fasteners detached when boneless limbs reached out to snag him, ruched kamui halves slipping off cream-colored skin as the heiress takes advantage of its less than stellar grip on her body to slide out of its hold. Fisting the kamui's cloth and swiftly yanking him out of the primordial's range, she hurls him away and safely out of reach when it tries doing to him what it had done to his goku counterparts, but close enough so that he and her little sister can put the final part of their plan into action.

She passes by her elites to lead them safely out of the chamber, Nonon, Ira, and Uzu sharing a knowing look with her. They all knew the risks associated with leaving the most susceptible person to the life fibers' influence to finish the job, but there was no other choice left. If they stayed to fight together, they would be incapacitated by smoke and surely killed. At the very least, if by some chance the primordial life fiber had succeeded, they would have another opportunity to resist Earth's fate, to finish it off as soon as it rose above the burning Kiryuuin mansion wreck. No words were spoken, but the devas loyally depart from the ruined chamber without looking back, clearing a path for their leader.

Mako is next to depart, Ryuuko's body shoved under her outstretched arm and walked over to the great entrance. Just as the hybrid nudges her out the curved doorway, she is grasped and

wedged back within the shorter girl's arms, the brunette's eyes aflame with intense resolve, unhampered in the slightest by near-mortal wounds. She thinks of nothing but the girl in front of her, her first and best friend, the one who taught her so much in the little time she spent in her life. She thinks of the times they spent together, when the roughened delinquent decided to show her softer personality for the first time in years in front of her - a vulnerable side she refused to show anyone for stubborn willingness to prevent others from even remotely feeling sorry for her, or needing to shoulder the burden she thinks her own punishment for transgressions she didn't even know warranted it. And her heart swells with happiness.

"Ryuuko-chan!" she blurts out impulsively as always after a split-second of indecision, "When you're done with this and you've saved the world, let's go on a date!"

"A date," Ryuuko repeated, turning it over in her head. And, with a fond look in her eye, nodded slowly, the idea already immensely appealing without needing further encouragement. Her lips split into a genuine smile, tender and loving. "Yeah, I could go for one."

"You can't die!" she demands, puffing up her cheeks for emphasis. "No dying today!"

"Yeah, alright," Ryuuko laughs softly, reaching under her billed cap and ruffling short strands of neatly-combed hair affectionately. "I won't."

Watching the brawler limp away until she disappeared from view, she turned her attention back to the last remaining deva. Scissors scraped against each other, their master shifting on her feet in barely-contained eagerness as she watched the struggling would-be deity out of the corner of her eyes. "Anything else ya wanna tell me? Now is a pretty good time."

"Be aware that you only have less than three minutes from now - at a *very* generous estimate - to evacuate before the entire building collapses. By my calculations, the room should contain the majority of the blast and prevent ... undesirable projectiles... from flying towards our allies outside even with the advanced deterioration the mansion possesses."

A nod, gear-rimmed eyes growing keener with determination. "Got it."

"Ryuuko."

She whirled around to meet her sister's expectant gaze as the last deva escaped, the god-being roaring in absolute fury when thick tendrils swiftly slashed into another of Inumuta's last surviving clones from the start of the battle and reduced it to glittering shards, yielding neither hide or hair of its prey. Satsuki fought with her tongue for the briefest of moments, a million and one thoughts and words coming to mind and the tip of her tongue, and yet refusing to even grace the person she thought about for the majority of her life with their mere presence. And, as she took a steadying breath and cleared her thoughts, the simplest of them all came back to mind.

Her gaze was firm as ice, but her tone was far from an arctic storm. "Take care of yourself."

Grinning, Ryuuko dipped her head.

“Thanks, Satsu- ” she cut off abruptly, a touched and tender look reflected in her eye even as heating cheeks turned away in faint embarrassment, “Thanks, ...sis.”

A rare smile escaped her despite herself, her rebellious mouth conferring all that a select handful of words could not before the former dictator of Honnouji Academy turned and went to assist her sister’s best friend.

The near-silent *shhhk* of bare feet against pocked concrete and the scraping of blades against graveled ground were all that occupied the space between them; the fires and destruction that raged mere feet above them seemed pale in comparison, a booming orchestra of sound and buffeting vibrations that rained plaster and bits of scaffolding upon them reduced to something akin to a distant thunderstorm.

A small smirk graced feral lips when fiber lines tried - and failed - to remove the protrusion, great lengths of feather-soft rope fruitlessly attempting to grasp the wrecked carrier by water-slick sides and only managing to push the razors deeper within its mass.

All she had to do was buy them time, several precious minutes to get as far away from this damned place as possible. And judging by the looks of its distracted state, she had all the time in the world.

"Kiiiiirryuuuuuuuuuuuuinnnn!" it howled, flailing about as it rammed itself into the ceiling, the walls, the painstakingly-painted murals of life fibers’ triumphs - anything to get the great naked dagger out of its brain!

“Yeah?” she scoffed, casually stepping into its sight and hefting a blade over a shoulder.

The air whistled, razor-sharp fibers darting to her head. She lazily craned her neck, allowing them to slide on by with not as much of a scratch on her form.

“Not bad for humanity, huh?” she taunted, quirked a brow. “Told ya humans were made outta tougher stuff than you give them credit for.”

The approaching fibers shot out in lieu of a response. She could just make out the illuminated yellow tracer streaks it created that made up what had to be certain death to normal humans as they sped towards her, and it was her swords-turned-shield that prevented it, the hybrid grinning in smug triumph when they pelted uselessly against them. Barely even flinching with each dull thud of a ricochet, she allowed a certain giddiness to fill her, adrenaline now fading to a certain calm now that their victory seemed all but assured. Stray projectiles would streak by her arms or stab the air around her, but none managed to even so much as touch her hair.

Really, with how desperate and angered it had become now that it was grounded and its stolen power all but expended, this was almost too easy.

A crackle, and then a familiar voice materialized in her ear.

“Matoi, we’ve cleared the perimeter. Detonation primed and ready for your signal.”

She nodded, even though she knew he couldn’t possibly see it. “Yeah, got it.”

She leapt, rolling into a protective crouch as the room collapsed around her, fiery red eyes peering from underneath a mop of hair to lock gazes with her kamui at the same time.

“Senketsu!”

“Ryuuko!”

She steeled herself, and with a few readying steps backward, ran headlong into the rushing force, heedless of the danger the god posed.

“Now!”

An all-consuming explosion buckled the foundations of the building, great spurting plumes of flames racing along the walls and filling the vast chamber in its entirety. The Primordial Life Fiber screeched as it was immolated, bundles of glowing orange fibers dropping to the floor, where they lay in dimming, dying flaming piles.

She rocketed up, up, up on a mangled steel plate seizing fingers barely managed to cling on to, shooting high in the air and carried by the roaring gusts of winds far past the boundaries of the opened ceiling into the night sky. Her skin tingled, burned, briefly etching away to reveal raw dermis below before her rapid healing regenerated it in soothing passes. Senketsu flew on heated currents to her open arms, separate pieces sliding along the length of her body and snapping into place like a well-worn glove when she hugged him close, two bodies becoming one once more. High above it all, she watched as the primordial god slowly turned to her in mute surprise, its massive body only just barely able to face her, struggling to move out of her range. And in the pre-dawn light, she spotted the growing crowd of Nudist rebels gathering outside the dying remains of the Kiryuuin legacy, instantly recognizing Satsuki and Mako’s expectant faces among the many present amid the tattered shreds of the last, great COVERS army.

Angling her head down as they reached their peak, she patted Senketsu appreciatively, genuinely grinning as she felt him quiver in anticipation beside her.

“Ready, Senketsu?”

Suspenders tugged lightly against kneading shoulders, eyes smiling and focused on nothing but her, a moment forever trapped in the femtosecond they spent perfectly suspended mid air before gravity won their bodies over once more. “Always.”

They fell, the warrior weaving through jet streams midair to dive headfirst, rotating within the whorls of rushing air flaring about her. Fingers curled, a fist tightening to spring the loaded pin free of its restraints and drive a waiting needle home. The bitter agonizing pain hit her milliseconds later, tearing at her skin, but the searing burn of a thousand suns in their corrupted synchronization only encouraged her all the more, her friend and guardian sharing

her thoughts as well as he fought on, resisting the acidic bite of a hostile host body with newly-gained strength. Glossy formfitting black became propelling rockets, heels expanding to shift into thrusters that carried her forward in high-pitched screams.

"Are you that keen on dying!?" it roared, sending wave after wave of darting fiber-spears and directed missiles at her spiraling, dangerously accelerating form.

Blazing rockets split, untapered ends expanding to allow many layered flaps to splay themselves like ornamented fan segments. Aerodynamic eye crests extended, Senketsu's ever-watchful gaze becoming more than swept-back wings that guided her screaming, baying form onward. Waves of differing air pressures highlighted by whip cracks of sound and trims of energy that burned white at the core and red at its tips trailed behind her, a human meteorite in the making. A shark-like grin spread across her features, a fierce glint twinkling in her eyes as she twirled within the shock-wave that danced around her to dive past the shooting bullets, flung shells detonating harmlessly behind.

"No, because that's how I'll live - snatching life straight from the jaws of death!"

They broke in scarlet starbursts before the domed entrance of the great chamber swallowed them whole, Senketsu desynchronizing and allowing himself to slip off her body. Ryuuko snatched him out of the air, twisting as she fell to fling him away to the safety of the Nudist forces. Scissor halves were tossed by the retreating kamui's cuffs, hands snagging their handles and hoisting them above her body. Nodding resolutely at her beloved companion as he fell to safety, she closed her eyes and pictured her friends, her family, everyone that cared and depended on her for mankind's survival, sharply inhaling as she felt their spirit, their very determination fill her soul.

Breaching through thick clouds of smog and grasping tendrils, she snapped fiber-colored eyes wide open and roared her defiance, hefting both swords far above her head.

"I'll take my own path, no matter what anyone says, and I sure as hell won't let you take that option away for anyone else!"

Hardened fibers clicked, scissors splintered along broad lengths. Segments shifted and rearranged in one great wave from the handle to the tip as inner mechanisms obeyed their master's will and transformed. They expanded, easily dwarfing the Nudist ship's length and blotting out the light of the moon.

Twin swords slammed against it at Mach 1, the ground far below shattering underneath the titanic being's body as the resulting breeze slammed against it. Hairline cracks plastered upon weakened armor grew, spider web-like patterns racing down its length faster than the eye could see. Fragments flew free in peals of delicate chimes as the entire shielding buckled and collapsed, shards succumbing to gravity's might in crystalline splinters that caught the fiery light like glassy raindrops. A shooting star, her path was tailed by tracer lights of red, increasing in intensity as she shouted loud her suffered agony, her exalted proclamation of life's ferocity. Sparks flew from the crimson blades' edges, metallic screeches assaulting her ears as rending scissors clashed against the red strings of fate. Like a thrusting fist through

weakened wooden boards, she tore through hardened material left brittle and yielding by the great naked ship's destructive end, teeth grit and eyes narrowed as innumerable layers of padded fibers were slaughtered before her.

Her wolfish grin stretched to the confident twinkles in her eyes, heart singing high, blood trilling in her ears as she shifted her blades and chainsawed her way to the center. She was close, and the doomed god knew it as well.

The forest of orange thickened. Spindles jutted out in random angles from the great tunnel like those within arteries, interspersing fibers flattened and tamped down as she all but burned her way through to its heart.

Just a little further!

Come on, come on!!!

There!

A glint of yellow, an orb that shone brilliantly within the hollow space.

Sparks flew. Metallic screeches rasped as the scissor halves brushed against each other, flung back as their owner pushed off the inner cladding in a burst of wind and sound.

“FINISHING MOVE: SEN’I SOSHITSU!”

Matching arcs of red screamed in the air, whistling as keen edges cut a path through the sanctified space.

“YEAARRRRRRGH!”

SHNK!

Scarlet spilled on yellow.

“Urk!”

She looked down, body twitching instinctively as gear-pupiled eyes drank in the sight of a lance lodged in the center of her being.

A thin trail of bright ochre blazed its way down the orange length that split skin and spliced well into her fibers, burning bright even under flesh in slow pulses.

“The hell?” she growled out, wincing as a billion stabbing sensations assaulted her wracking, uncontrollably shaking form.

A thousand voices smugly replied as her head was snapped upward, gaze trained past the bored hole to the sky above, *"Think of it as a parting gift of sorts. A consolation prize- your wish of remaining amongst the human filth by being immortalized along with them as witnesses to the cocoon genesis."*

Red snapped against orange in response. Blades screeched against their geminal bodies as a screw drove through orienting halves to lock them tight around the very heart of the thing that besieged an ailing humanity, a plague long in the making that deserved to be eradicated. Metallic groans filled the air, hardened fibers straining against their own kind in a battle of strength and wills.

"Ah." It tilted, sounding amused more than anything else despite its final fate being so near. *"Holding your audience hostage with primitive acts of violence now, are we? Well, go on, Kiryuuin. Speak. Proselytize. Sway me with your words, the power of that which our beings are bred to feed upon, the stock made to be consumed by their clothing."*

Completed scissor shivering in hand, she merely increased the pressure on the opposing halves. The hardened weapon groaned under the strain, flakes of protective coating on the thrumming orb falling away.

Her eyes flared, fangs parting to allow heated words past. "People are people! Clothing is clothing! People do not live for the sake of clothing, and they sure as hell will never do!"

A mad laugh, distorted cackles of glee that raked unpleasantly in her mind. *"Ha! It is too late! Your precious planet is doomed, and the far reaches of the universe with it! The cocoon genesis will be fulfilled, and there's no way you can stop it! Even possessing the she-Kiryuuin's absolute domination ability, your strength won't be able to reverse it!"*

"And if I take your power for myself!?" she shouted back, fingers clenching thick wads of the wriggling material within whitened knuckles.

An angry growl. ***'WHAT!?!'***

Ryuuko smirked, derisively staring down the fiber line to the great hovering mass below. Her eyes moved down where the lance pierced clean through her core, giddy when energy returned to her in rapid pulses of yellow-white, drawn from the very essence of the god-being itself. It moved to disengage, to break away, but barbed fibers within her body dug into its threaded mass, anchoring it to her with unbelievable titanic strength. Her fibers invaded its tissue, mapping out its body in sprawling branches, covering its mass with slow moving waves in a horrifying mirror of how it once was done to her.

It sputtered, the masses of voices screeching in disordered frenzy. *'You took that hit on purpose!?!'*

"Nah," she grinned, flashing a mouth full of sharpened teeth. "But I took it on the chin and thought of it as another lesson in life's hard knocks. And I figured while I was doing so, I'd reverse the absolute domination crap just to save me time. Besides... I can't let you do this crap! I have everyone counting on me and a date riding on this!"

Indeed, as it took in the scope of the situation, it felt a tug at the back of its collective consciousness, a prod that could be overlooked had she not said anything. And then, a black hole, a whirling tornado that swept through, ravaging it from the inside out.

Its struggles renewed, fiercer than ever. Terror - a feeling that it didn't even *know* it possessed - screaming high, screaming shrill within the thousands of voices that comprised it, the mass flailed. Strikes that could level small mountains fell short of their target, the paltry remainders of lanced vines it could conjure falling away. It fell back to soiled ground with a bone-quivering thud, no longer able to keep itself afloat midair. Roaring eddies of power now pitifully drained to mere trickles, it was left to bear witness to humanity's triumph, a bitter struggle long fought, only able to weakly paw at her in half-hearted attempts to remove her.

Ryuuko smirked, feeling its power roil inside, surging through her veins, bringing life anew to her own. An aura flared to life, roaring, crackling flames that encased her body as she *shone*, her form a mere smudge of black amidst a relentless stream of white. Ambient heat was yanked from the surroundings, pulled to her center as she started to shine, to *burn* like the morning sun while everything around her started to *freeze*, ice forming where her qi's edges touched and falling in vaporizing snowflakes. Gulping deep breaths of air, she shouted to the heavens, her voice roaring mightily and shaking the world to its foundations.

"Listen up, all you life fibers! People are people! Clothing is clothing! Release them from your hold, and return all humans to how they once were!"

A great wave of rainbow washed over it once more as her call was spread throughout the planet, magnified and repeated endlessly by the blanket of listening fibers. And in the wake of her shout, silence. For a moment, the Earth stood still.

And then, it shook. A gentle breeze tailing her speech issued forth from parted lips, spiritus vitae stretching out to all four corners of the planet to bring life anew, to return stolen energy. Her qi faded, leaving her to bask in a pleasant afterglow that shrouded her in an oddly serene warmth unparalleled by even the likes of Junketsu. Body still framed by a vibrant reddish-white backlight, her head leisurely roved over to gaze at the overhead mass, where indeed the crimson sky was starting to buckle. Layered weaves crumbled away, burning at the edges in sweeping waves of invisible flame. A sky became streaked with white, cocoons releasing hapless prey as they too were reduced to nothing but ashes.

She tilted her head to regard the god-being lying beneath her, euphoria faded to a certain calm now that all of humanity was safe and sound once more.

"So," it murmured, hundreds of thousands of voices reduced to a single emotionless hum, a shell of its former glory. *"It's over. All that planning... all that guided evolution... reduced to nothing."*

"That's right," she confirmed, gaze firm and glacial. "The cocoon genesis will never happen, and you ain't gonna be anything more than a pile of ashes after today."

A listless scoff. *"I care not about what happens to this body. Life fibers will return to this planet. It is inevitable. They cannot escape their fate."*

Silence on her end, her expression twisted, a stabbing twinge of pity bordering on absolute contempt as she looked upon the dying god.

A dry laugh. *"We - no, I - suppose, it matters not in the end. Humanity has already been groomed to accept clothing. Millennia of impulses, the desire to be subjugated by the life fibers... it cannot be easily undone. And it will make reinvasion all the more quicker. Who knows, rather than taking over two million years, it could be done in just a decade."*

A twitch of brows, lips turning down into a grimace. "And humans will still remain humans."

"Hmph. So be it. But know this, Kiryuuin Ryuuko," it ominously replied, its opponent never breaking line of sight even as vines pulled away from its dying body and moved toward her. Creeping past her stilled form, they slowly wrapped around the scissor handles, binding them tight and adding to the crushing force. *"Know that my influence on you has only grown since you were first connected to me that fateful day, when you pledged yourself as the new guardian and propagator of the life fibers. And even after today, when I decide my own fate, it will remain. This is not the end for you."*

And with that, the vines gave one final squeeze. Scissor blades snapped together with a metallic clang, a single decisive blow cleaving the fiber-god's heart in perfect halves.

There was a pause, and then the great mass unraveled, sloughs of fibers tearing away from the colossal being like snow around the falling warrior. The fiber-dagger pushed deeper into her body, its tailed end abruptly splitting, lashing out, her skin peeling away under its ravaging touch before snapping back into place.

She screamed, a small vortex of orange fibers from its core swirling about her in gale winds, tearing at her skin, her body, tugging at bared flesh in thinly-veiled attempts to take her down with its dying breaths. The spear stabbing her straight through her lungs was the last to dissolve, flaking away in dissolving oranges like great goutts of spilling flames. Tightly twisted threads unwound, loosely bunched cloth tattering as they were slowly absorbed into her body - the wounding bodies a bleeding one eagerly devoured whole.

A sudden flash, and it was gone, leaving her alone within the empty, burning chamber once more on bended knee. She hissed, clutching her rapidly beating heart, staring at where the great fiber-god once was and almost expecting it to somehow reform once more from shorn skeins. But the chamber remained silent, remained deathly still, with nothing but the approaching fires and the dying fibers, heaping battleship-sized piles of severed threads whose orange bodies darkened, a deadened brown sweeping across their twined bodies like a plague from end to end.

Woozy, she rose, vision swimming. Feet moved in drunken patterns, vertigo firmly taking hold and spinning her world on its head. Her throat tightened, stomach squeezing itself as the powerful urge to vomit took hold. Unable to do much else, she merely stared straight ahead, mouth dumbly hanging agape and mind slowed to a crawl as thoughts struggled to pierce the haze that surrounded it. A tremble made itself home within her body. Sharp pangs scratched away at delicate eyes as her vision blurred, barbed stings assaulting delicate tissue as a trickle of red leisurely slid down her skin. Slowly, shakily, she raised her hands to inspect them,

noting how her veins pressed against taut skin, pulsing red fibers easily viewed underneath paper-thin white.

Her head craned, watching as the great matrix above collapsed as well, innumerable flakes of red peeling away from the mass to send their payloads hurtling to the earth below. And when the last of the burning embers faded away, she sighed deeply and turned her gaze higher towards planets distant, a sudden emptiness filling her despite her uncontested victory.

She looks over at her hands, threads of peach color returning to pale skin. Her gaze moves past it, to the four pairs of vines lining her spine like some freaky super-villain, at the pearly white horns sprouting from her skull, at the bony kamui-borne plates protruding from her hips, all perfectly unscuffed despite the veritable bath of violence she just threw herself in - a testament to their unnatural, alien nature.

She won.

It's over.

But...

Why didn't it feel that way?

The distant crunching of falling concrete snapped her out of her reverie, however, drawing her back to the present as thin trails of gray smoke started to seep through the open doorway.

Dazed, body spasming as mind-numbing aches rocked it, she lamely trudged up the spiraling staircase, sharpened corners of hewn rock swimming in and out of focus. Body turning to jelly before her and legs clogged by fevered sluggishness, she cried desperately as knee met stone, wincing as a fresh jolt of agony hit her battered body. She stumbled, half-blinded by the cloudy veil, slowly feeling her way along the ruined siding. Only vaguely aware of what was going around her and barely registering her movements as if she were a bystander, she blinked dumbly even as more of her body became wooden, limbs increasingly refusing to cooperate.

Her face burned, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes even as she ducked low, holding her breath and avoiding the brunt of the fire's clout. Her hands shook, pointed tips of shortened swords digging firmly into stone, improvised crutches supporting her every torturous step of the way. Arms pulled, trembling as her own weight became like that of a heavy stone tied around the ankle of a drowning man, knuckles turning white as clenching fingers wrapped tightly around molded tangs. She heaved, clearing yet another step of the hundreds the cursed mansion seemed to possess. Already she could see where the Nudists had blasted through, hammered indents of the behemoth's metal-clad fists freshly carved into hewn walls in their assault against the Kiryuuin matriarch.

Ryuuko panted, knives stabbing her lungs with every burning breath taken despite her attempts to still them.

I have to... get out...

A dull burn flared in her core. Wearied muscles stung, sharp acidic bites plaguing their attempts to right their master as she wobbled, her arm swiping an elongated blade to clear the rubble-strewn path. Her body seized. She collapsed as soon as the last stair cleared, skull cracking against ground and blood-smeared face meeting the edges of lapping water. Her blood *boiled*, skin singeing, searing, blackening as it bubbled and burnt away in whispered hisses, healthy pink only just managing to replace injured flesh before the vicious cycle started anew. The room seemed to shift then. Her sight wavered, objects losing their focus and briefly splitting in two, three, four duplicates that collapsed into each other and diverged once more in intermittent spells. Shadows crept in corners flaming tongues had yet to touch, slithering along the grand bath's lengths to lick at her heels. Shapes outlined by flaring orange became nightmarish, burning tapestries becoming ghoulish claws that sought to snatch her by the heels and drag her back into the chamber to await her fate amongst the rest of the burning scrap heap, to make her burial tomb the consecrated space meant to be the seed for humanity's destruction. Groaning, she struggled to raise her head, straining against the overwhelming urge to blackout as a sluggish haze seemed to set itself upon her mind. Breathing slowed to a crawl, seconds stretching into infinity as unbearable heat scorched her skin, perpetually burning it away as internal life fibers frantically worked to keep their host alive.

Give up.

Her body remained there, corpse like in nature even as choking smoke lowering itself to flooded tiling robbed her of precious oxygen, toxic smog choking her. Suffocating her.

Get up.

Fingers clawed in useless attempts to find purchase upon hewn rock, strength all but completely sapped. An elbow moved, bracing against polished stone and quivering, spasming as tendons stretched and pulled in vain as a hidden consciousness rebelled at her apparent subordination, unwilling and unable to accept its demise here.

Give. Up.

Get up.

Give up.

Her shoulders trembled. Then, with an air of finality, relaxed. Her back drooped, stomach unknotting to lie flat against ruined tiling.

GIVE. UP.

A head turned to the side, idly watching as tainted water dribbled from burst pipes, muddy liquid leisurely sliding down rent metal and pooling upon cratered ground. As shapes grew indistinct and paired senses dulled, she thought of her father, of her promise to avenge his death. Of her family, her friends.

She blinked, watching one droplet fall after another.

Plip.

As if she were no longer in control of her body, she passively watched her arm as it lay upon the floor, detachedly observing the growing flames that consumed the building proper like rabid wolves around her.

Plip.

She wouldn't have to fight anymore. She could rest easy knowing the last great source of active life fibers would be burned to ashes.

Plip.

It would be so easy, and she didn't even have to do anything to ensure it.

...

...

Bones cracked. Flesh pulled, spurts of energy feeding ligaments. Blood rushed, pounding, pushing through to bring life to tattered muscles once more. A hand clenched. Skin stretched over a skeletal frame, bones sliding into place like clockwork.

Red blazed with newfound purpose, rims burning with passion, the face of her best friend swimming in front of her warped vision.

"No."

Teeth grit. Twin scissors jangling between fanged ivory, she extended a hand, dragging her body along with it. A stubborn head craned upward, soot-smeared and fierce.

"I have not... come this far... to die now."

Curled fists struck shattered marble, corded muscles straining against stone to lift a wounded body from where it lay. A distant explosion sent plumes of sizzling brushed past her naked body, searing jolts of pain rippling across damaged flesh and forcing hissed swears from her throat. But she did not falter, did not stop even when the billowing mass of smoke started to descend lower and lower, clouding her vision and choking her lungs, leaving a trail of glistening red as she crawled, struggled to leave a discarded fate behind.

Outside, the Nudists huddled together, shielding each other from the cold with what little supplies they had. Breaths issued forth in white wisps, fine mists that dissipated as they rose to the heavens, a spectre of old living within its derelict domain. Feet pawed at the snow nervously, thin layers of fur-lined cloth the only protection against frostbite. Senketsu once again hung on the elder Kiryuuin's shoulders, eyes peering anxiously over a tousled mass of hair as the distinct sounds of fighting grew subdued, a powerful tingle radiating through frosted skies and knitted fibers the only indication that Ryuuko had successfully reached the core. He squirmed, the long-haired woman staring off into the distant reaches of once-attended grounds patiently tolerating his antics, remaining frozen in the same position ever since he had been snatched out of the air by her dexterous fingers. He twitched, his entire being stiffening in a heartbeat when he heard it.

A distant tinkle, the cracking of marbles against glass.

And just like that, a disturbance rippled through the air, ruffling past and kicked pleated uniforms upward in gentle winds. The great celestial mesh above buckled, crunched, started to crumble, great pieces of the fragmenting cocoon shattering at the edges before astounded eyes. Cracks traveled rapidly inward, breaking the solid mass apart as it passed over - an invisible zipper undoing the binds that shackled humanity to a doomed future.

Silence, hundreds of eyes trained on faint white smears among darkened skies in slack jawed awe.

And then, cheers, a collective exultation of victory that shook loose snow from feathered tree boughs and drowned out the din of the primordial being's death throes.

"She did it," Soro breathed, relieved, beaming as wearied eyes drank the sight thousands of humans raining from the sky in, completely freed at last from their fate and painting bold streaks across a star-spangled canvas in their journey home.

An aristocratic mouth twitched, fine lines drawn upward and parted in a genuine smile. A shuddered breath, a sigh of relief paired with heaving shoulders. And in the corners of her eyes, a gathering wetness that made her war-weary eyes shine bright with renewed life - all a collective motion that sloughed off the weight of the world. "Yes. Finally, we are free of this Kiryuuin curse."

She turned, fully expecting to feel the earth shake underneath her feet as a certain rambunctious chimera thundered down in a crater of her own making beside her, swords

cockily slung over her shoulders and a stolen prize wrested from the god-thing's corpse to mark her triumph nestled within her fist.

But... none came.

She frowned then, sharp cobalt sweeping over the ravaged remains of the once-great fortress dedicated to the end of mankind. Where was Ryuuko?

Fire crackled. Wooden supports crumbled. Great stories of luxurious stones collapsed one by one, the earth underneath trembling as the bastion against humanity crumpled. A symphony of heavy thuds and squeaking metal, it was all but drowned out by fire's triumphant crackling snaps as the raging inferno leapt to meet it, devouring fresh fuel whole. But not one trace of her long-lost little sister was present.

"Where's Ryuuko?" her voice sharply raised in volume, panic involuntarily seizing control of her words when the red-streaked delinquent failed to appear within the next handful of minutes. "Where's Ryuuko!?"

Mako's head instantly snapped up from where she lay within the cargo helicopter, keeling over as the sudden motion proved too much for her blood-deprived state.

"Ryuuko!" she shouted, knocking the makeshift IV pole over and struggling against the layers of padded cloth that now encircled her battered form.

Houka scanned the billowing clouds with freshly obtained tinted lenses, displays contained within a more advanced pda switching rapidly between zoomed infrared views and thermal ones. His hand swiveled, tousled mats of blue hairs sticking to a sweat-plastered forehead underneath a form-fitting mask as he waved the device over an increasingly broad area in front of him. And all he saw was red. Wisps of fiery color drew indistinctly across red noise, hues of copper and salmon dominating the lonely backdrop. Of the scene, not one human-shaped iota of blue or purple there was to be seen, no raging delinquent with scissor swords there was to be had. He'd resigned himself to telling his lady of the unfortunate news, steeling his nerves for the guarded look of crushed defeat when suddenly, he saw it.

A flicker of movement, a garbled litany of muffled swears, and her form suddenly flashed on his screen, visible, but only just. Scanners locked on, visuals catching her every movement with custom-built lenses. All the while a HUD flared to life, chattering her vitals and sending streaking lines of jagged heartbeats racing across his device's top. Hope swelling in his lungs, he called out, only just barely aware of the absolute relief, the sheer gladness that crossed Honnouji's leader's face when cobalt met hunched-over ivory.

"There she is!"

Bloodied and shell-shocked, Ryuuko stumbled through the crumbling front entrance of the titanic mansion, a darkened figure dwarfed by choking gray and vibrant orange as the roaring fire consumed the building proper. Gasping for breath, she doubled over as soon as she cleared the blazing inferno, falling to her knees as gentle wheezing sharply devolved into hacking coughs. A pressure built up within, crackling energy racing through her body that strained against its carnal prison. Sweltering heat besieged her battered form, a sweat

breaking out even as chilled morning winds swept past her naked form. Her soot-smearred body curled in even further in grotesque angles as if the very thin goose bump-ridden tissue were bursting at the seams in desperate attempts to contain the sudden shifting of bones, curling into itself with arms tightly wrapped around her midriff as yet another sickening wave roiled within, skin prickling as it suddenly seemed much too small for her.

Her stomach rolled, and she gagged, hacking up brackish fluid in pained coughing fits as the feeling grew stronger, more intense. Like a great demon escaping from the bowels of the underworld, it raged against that which kept it prisoner, ruthlessly clawing great lines of flaring torment, white-hot burning that thrust and twisted daggers into fragile viscera. She shivered, heartbeats coming in rapid and shallow and breaths strained, almost nonexistent as air struggled to move past conniving sets of muscles that sought to keep it trapped within seizing lungs. Something pulled at her, drawing her in all directions, great sets of invisible clamps locked upon peachy flesh and tugging relentlessly.

She roared in agony then, arms suddenly flung akimbo and head snapped back as a thick pillar of solid azure shot into the sky, burning a line brighter than the sun through choking gray clouds of roiling smog and inky darkness. Stars of blue and red twinkled about its edges, the expanding column tearing the grass and flinging dirt away as it pushed outward. The stunned Nudists seemed to snap out of their trance then, raising their arms to shield their faces as shockwaves thundered forth, powerful bursts of light and sound that shook the earth and pierced the heavens. Air crackled with energy, charged space raising hairs and specs of flickering white visibly snapping between planes of existence, converging towards the rushing stream and feeding into the burning blue blazing through the cosmos. The streak briefly winked out, beads of blue twinkling daintily in the night sky before it returned in full force, a pulse of blue-white tearing surrounding mountains at their roots and upending trees by the dozen.

Behind her, the remnant mansion burned, a silhouette of charred black amidst an all-encompassing raging inferno of wavering orange swirls that placed the last fiberborn right back at the beginning of her journey, with the lonely death of a parent and the fiery demise of haunts she once called home.

Ashes to Ashes; Dust to Dust

Chapter End Notes

The end?

(Epilogue coming soon)

Fallen Leaves

Chapter Summary

GET THE FUCK UP!

Chapter Notes

With thanks and endless gratitude to h0saki for her dedication to KLK, all the reviewers, you, the reader!, Hox for battle scene coordinations (kumite/fist-fighting), Kill la Kill and its many makers for the endless entertainment it provided, Deag for encouraging my many bad ideas, EliteSlayer103 and weazelbeater for getting me the fuck up, and MEDIC! for teaching me how to swan song.

Thank you for being patient with me and for reading the story this far. Thank you for being with me when I achieved an 8-year long dream of writing something with over 100K words. And, as always, thank you for your support. I honestly could not have stuck with this this far if the little kudos/favorite emails and pm notifications didn't ping me now and then.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Nngh...

“ ...ko... Ryuu... Wake up... “

The snow felt unbelievably wonderful against her overheating form, glittering crystals melting away into a sad puddle beneath her. She didn't care how brutally the slush bit at her bared body, all she knew that it was much preferable to when she was being *burnt alive*, suffocating within the choking darkness and blindly stumbling, reaching out for anything as the world threatened to collapse and bury her under a burning pile of rubble...

She struggled to think, to see. The world was muted, noise deadened by the surrounding arctic wasteland.

“Ngh... Ah... ”

The call of a distant crowd, the crunch of ice underhand, loosely gripped within chilled fingers. She blinked owlishly, staring blankly at it as nailbeds started to take on a bluish hue matched by the kamui-dyed streaks in her hair. A low groan threaded its way out her throat, pained noises rasping against delicate tissue.

Whose fingers...?

She tried to move, only managing to crane her head upward a grand total of three inches before her overworked muscles gave out underneath. Her body slumped back against soggy soil pathetically - a stark contrast to mere moments ago when she practically laid waste to the land around her just by existing.

Tired... so tired...

“Ryuuko!”

A stab of irritation. An attempt at furrowing her brows, lips slowly parting to weakly bare sharpened teeth in warning to this new *intruder* that dared bother her now.

What now? Leave me alone...!

“Ryuuko? ... Ryuuko!?”

What more do you want of me... !?

“Ryuuko! Wake up!”

Distantly, as if she were no longer quite part of her body and was instead a spectator of it, she felt her body be dragged away further into the snow’s blessed cold. A second later, and she was turned onto her side, a hand delicately brushing the stray hairs out of her face. The grimace disappeared at the touch, lips sluggishly thinning into a dreamy smile. Eyes glossy and half-lidded, she panted, drinking in the sight of her worried, full-blooded sister craning overhead, familiar navy cloth and brown hair swathed in an ungodly amount of bandages swimming into view behind her not a moment later. A relaxed sigh escaped her lips as they

pulled her tired, sore body onto a lap, rolling her over so that her back leisurely curled around battle-marked legs.

“Hah... hah... hah...”

Garnet eyes rolled back, taking in the morning sky as the new dawn peeked over remote mountaintops, taking in the morning sky so blessedly free of parasitic fibers, a fight so hard and long fought. The last of the stars twinkled overhead, blue giving way brilliant pinks and reds, a wondrous menagerie of colors despoiled by the choking column of black smoke rising into the horizon from the still-burning mansion. Drinking in the sight, she barked out a single laugh at the very fate prescribed for the world - a fate solidly and utterly *defied* by the mere denizens with which it was concerned with! - , bidding that damned, *infernal* place an insincere farewell. She shuddered. Her body seized. And with that, she breathed, lids slowly sliding shut as she finally was laid to rest amidst friends and allies both old and new.

The steady click-clacking of footsteps did nothing to soothe the security guard's irritation. In fact, it worsened it so, and he openly displayed it by viciously ruffling the daily newspaper he poured over, brushing a finger over sandpaper-like stubble and not bothering to deign the newcomer with neither time nor eye contact. Hunching his shoulders when the footsteps merely drew closer, he fisted the paper, the scowl evident in his clipped voice.

“Visiting hours are over. Please come back tomorrow at the - ”

A cool, calm voice with the authority of gods interrupted him. “I believe I was informed by the director that my person is one of the exceptions to that rule.”

Bushy brown brows shot to the ceiling in surprise as the guard finally sighted the visitors in question, skin paling considerably and heart instantly palpitating upon sight of one ebony-haired woman in particular. Papers scattered and chairs were knocked over in his haste to stand straight before the duo, bowing hurriedly and nearly concussing himself with the wooden watch-desk.

He shouted, eyes clenched shut and a bead of sweat forming at his hairline. “Lady Kiryuuin! Forgive me for speaking so rudely! If I had suspected you were going to visit, I would have made the essential preparations and - !”

A hand scarred from battles long passed and worn with countless hours of sword-wielding cut through the air dismissively. “Be at ease. I was unfortunately held up longer than I expected in a business meeting. I am here to see a certain patient in one of the upper wards, and I hope it isn't against regulations if I brought another with me; I ran into a friend on my way here.”

The guard jerked into motion, nodding so fast that his head became a whirring blur of frenetic activity. “Yes, of course. I would require a name, of course, and-”

“Matoi Ryuuko,” Satsuki spoke again, an amused lilt to her brows appearing at the sight of the heavily sweating man, watching the shorter girl at her hip busy herself with a generous bag bulging with chocolates and sweets with a small smile. “I believe she is in the intensive care unit ward.”

Without so much of another word, he quickly scrolled through his computer and printed their respective passes, practically trembling in his polished black loafers.

“Here you go, Miss Kiryuuin.” He cleared his throat abruptly, eyes averted and looking desperately anywhere except at the twin pools of calm ocean blue. “Room is 809.”

With a short “thank you”, the two were on their way up the elevator and onto the unit floor, whisked away from the quiet lobby in a car of glass and steel.

The corridors smelled of fresh paint and new drywall. They hadn’t even finished laying down replacement tiling when the pair strode through, carefully weaving in between stacked buckets of paint, prostrate ladders, and neatly piled wooden supports. Nudist security teams prowled the corridors in disguise, for surely the appearance of an armed man with an ostentatiously bright red mohawk suspiciously lingering about the ward during the day would attract any unwelcome visitors’ attention long enough for them to be dealt with properly. Nurses swarmed the floor, busying themselves with medication distributions and leftover admissions. Brusquely pushing carts and attending to the station in favor of thoroughly examining the newcomers, especially when the denotative badges of their chest brokered nothing more than a small tidbit of curious gossip to be disseminated among the grapevine, they only spoke to grunt directions to the patient’s room and grumble about incoming patients’ paperwork before returning to their duties.

The two parted the heavy cubicle curtain obscuring their view and, with a hushed *swish* of sliding metal rings, slipped inside the darkened room, becoming enveloped in the absolute *stillness* of it all. It was if they were adrift in the wildernesses in the dead of night, scavenging about in the afterwastes of humanity’s excesses, rooting through discarded fast food wrappers and miscellaneous junk for sustenance, pointedly alert for the same utter stillness their predatory counterparts exhibited before leaping for the kill. Potent, musky odors of antiseptic that cloyed and lemon-scented disinfectants that offended stung their noses, whitewashed walls and stark white linens reflecting the hospital’s obsession with sterile cleanliness. Get well cards and other tokens of well-meaning wishes decorated the side tables, forming quite a sizeable pile that threatened to spill over. Crowded around a bed were IV poles and monitors and at least a half-dozen lines running in and out of her flesh, even though both visitors knew that she could easily survive without them.

And speaking of the person in question, there she was.

Side by side, they stood, observing the sleeping girl before them, watching as machines mechanically pushed air into the unknown heroine's chest and pumped transparent fluids into her veins and down thin tubes in her throat. The world's savior lay still, completely helpless in her immobility. War against the life fibers won and repair funds funneled from Revocs itself, Japan's recovery from the worst onslaught against humanity's entirety the world had experienced in its history was amazingly rapid. Hospitals were among the first to receive the gratuitous financial aid, with more funds being put into repairing smaller medical centers across the country. Satsuki had paid well to ensure her long-lost sibling a private room in one with equally private doctors whilst less remote, more secure options were constructed, and it showed. Vitals in lime green changed to an inaudible rhythm, and only soft intermittent beeps and the melodic inhale-exhale cycle of the inpatient broke the monotonous silence. It wasn't physical damage that besieged the heroine triumphant, for the alien life housed within her would ensure such trivial matters would be taken care of in eye-blinks. Rather, it was something related to that very life, intangible in nature - something that lurked deep within her mind, festering within and biting away like thousands of insects on rotting meat. And it was that very thing that crippled her so, reducing her to a motionless husk shortly after she had emerged from the burning wreckage of the crumbling manor, screaming bloody murder to high-heavens above.

Naked no longer, the Kiryuuin-Matoi was fitted into cotton hospital gown-halves that easily hung loose upon her smaller frame, ribs now visible under skin from months of incredible strain accelerated by an exponentially heightened metabolism. From her billowing top to the too-wide sleeve openings, it looked as if she were dressed in robes instead, the white of the material fading into the similarly-colored bedding below and appearing to swallow her too-emaciated body whole. Her body was slightly rolled to the side, propped up by numerous pillows carefully lifting her up and away from the bed, where ivory points lining her spine made resting comfortably on her back impossible. Her face bore no distress, and the girl looked on with half-lidded eyes, effectively dead to the world around her in her comatic state. Her chest jerked, another whirring pump of air artificially inflating the twin organs before letting them deflate sharply. Protruding from a mane of ebony black hair were two sleek polished white horns that seemingly wrapped around her skull - a remnant from battles long fought and a curiosity whispered among the Nudist attendants through grapevine circles. A pen-scrawled note attached to the delinquent's chart at the foot of the bed merely stated that it seemed to be directly fused to - if not outright stemming from - her skull and warned against attempting to remove them; apparently, such an earlier endeavor caused the thin vines implanted along Ryuuko's spine to lash out and send poor Dr. Mankanshoku hurtling into newly repaired ceiling above. Wickedly curved and wildly mismanaged no longer, they hung fast against her hair, tapering off to delicate points at the rear. In a stunning bout of serene elegance typically reserved for the more refined Kiryuuiins of her blood-kind, she had the audacity to even look regal with them.

The partitioning curtain behind them was disturbed once more, three well-groomed men in similar embroidered lab coats stepped through the door's threshold, visibly starting upon seeing the two unexpected visitors before them.

Calm and collected as always, Satsuki spoke first. "Good evening, Inumuta, Iori, Dr. Mikisugi," she smiled, nodding as her Elites responded in kind, gladly responding that they

were pleased to see that she was able to come sooner than what her normal workload would have allowed to do.

"Ah, Ms. Kiryuuin! Pleasure to finally meet your acquaintance again after all these weeks!" the doctor greeted, stepping aside to let the other two closer.

A curt nod. "Likewise."

Tired blue orbs moved to lock onto similarly shaded ones. "And I remember Ms. Mankanshoku's antics as well," he gestured with a sweeping arm, where she was oohing and aahing over the various new machines that surrounded the comatose girl.

A patient twitch of lips, a shadowy ghost of a smile easily mistaken as a snarl by others. "My apologies. She is Ryuuko's family, as well as her first friend. It would make sense that she'd naturally want to be around her often."

"I wasn't accusing her of being a nuisance in the weeks she has taken to visiting Ryuuko almost every day. In fact, she has been anything but." Waiting for the younger girl to stop accidentally hitting him in the side with the ridiculously ornamented festival hat that seemed to go down to her nose and oversized food-filled backpack she was wearing, he cleared his throat and continued. "We are pleased to note that Ryuuko has started to transition into a higher state of awareness. As of two weeks ago, she had opened her eyes, and just the other day, has started to respond to stimulus within an incredibly limited range."

As per your request over the phone about a month ago, she is to remain on a ventilator due to the intermittent episodes where she appears to cease breathing completely for extended periods of time. The intravenous fluids, or total parenteral nutrition, have been calibrated to fit her dietary needs, most notably to correct a critical iron deficiency. Quite frankly, I was just as surprised as you were when we discovered the full extent of her injuries; I had expected it to be much worse, considering the outright abuse her body had sustained from the last battle!"

A curt nod. "Agreed. There is much that we do not know of the life fibers, especially those inside of my sister. If it isn't too much trouble, I would like to request a copy of her results for examination."

"As you wish, Ms. Kiryuuin," he smiled warmly, pen already moving across the chart's bushel of papers. "Dr. Mankanshoku processed your earlier request and signed off on it as Ryuuko's legal guardian. I'll make sure that you get a hard paper copy of all of Ryuuko's tests. Give me a few moments, and I'll be right back."

"Thank you, doctor."

The eccentric blue-haired physician replied his polite thanks and left the two with the two former Elites and the other sole occupant of the room.

Iori bowed his head slightly, long blond hair swept up into a neat ponytail cascading down his side, Houka following suit not a mere second after. "Lady Satsuki," they formally greeted.

“It’s just Satsuki now,” she responded with a hint of amusement, the small smile - all lips, no teeth - she gave to the ex-Nudist leader still nestled upon her face. “I no longer am your commander, and thus your peer. There is no need for such lofty titles anymore.”

“Old habits die hard,” Houka shrugged, pushing blue-lensed glasses up his nose. “It’ll be hard not to see you as our leader, no matter how long it is after the war. If I may, how is the transition going over at Revocs?”

“The replacement of Revocs’ board has not gone as smoothly as I’ve hoped, but they should be more than capable of handling the day’s affairs. Ragyou using the entirety of the company’s upper echelons to awaken the primordial life fiber make general company management and restructuring that much more difficult. I have no plans to dissolve the monopoly *she* created until restoration of the mainland is complete. But perhaps, this is a conversation for other times.” She gestured behind her. “I came to visit my sister. Unfortunately, I was unable to do so until now. I had forgotten about this latest transfer and had to consult with several Nudist Beach officers. Has there been recent developments I should know about?”

“Nothing that Mankanshoku hasn’t told you yet.” Iori nodded, jotting down his patient’s recent vitals on a loose paper scrap. “But just to be sure, we’ve run a battery of tests on Matoi - continuously, in fact, over the entirety of the time she’s been here. And it seems that with destroying the primordial life fiber, her body has...”

“Shut down?”

“Far from it,” Houka spoke up, twisting his body this way and that to put the ever-present electronic device out of reach as the brunette climbed atop him to take a peek at it, “Well, actually... yes, and no. It was not the primordial life fiber’s destruction that caused it, rather it was more likely the massive amounts of fibers she consumed in such a short span. In short, she is caught in a paradox, a state that overlaps quite a bit of qualities of coma patients and fully conscious ones! Brainwave patterns and analysis of life fiber bioenergies taken directly from her suggests unparalleled activity! Since Matoi is comprised of life fibers that have been humanized after their initial introduction into her body in order for both species to survive, it makes sense that they would mutate further. This extends into her ability to absorb new life fibers and integrate them into her own structure, or at least, their component molecules for additional growth. However - Mankanshoku, please, I can’t breathe if you’re pull- *grhk* - if you’re pulling at my shirt!”

Iori nodded, taking the PDA from the three-star’s flailing, offering hand and pointing out outlined areas on the readout, “However, this is also where the problem lies. I theorize that even with this genetic modification the life fibers adopted, there still lies a saturation point. Because Ryuuko’s life fibers were newly awakened when they were forced to do so on her massive scale, her body is struggling to process them. So, in other words, it’s in a catch-22. The more fibers she absorbs, the closer she is to death, which promotes internal life fiber activity to either generate or seek out and consume more life fibers to prevent preemptive destruction. This means that her body is constantly breaking down and regenerating, whiplashing back and forth between the two extremes. I suspect that her body was left with

no other choice but to temporarily arrest voluntary actions on her part to protect against being completely overwhelmed.”

No-star firmly on ground and glasses quickly adjusted to properly sit on his nose, Houka enthusiastically added, “I... I have no idea where to even begin! Blood tests detect elevated levels of growth hormones; levels far higher than those normally allowed during regular sleep cycles, actually! Attempts to surgically remove external vertebrae, pelvic additions, and cranial extrusions have all been met with failure! It appears as if her body has fully integrated them into itself; cuts made to each of them reveal interior bone structures enmeshed within tissue and clusters of nerves. What is most concerning is their regrowth even when the tools used were made of pure life fibers, rather than traditional steel, titanium, or ceramic.”

“The current theory proposed this far is that life fibers embedded in humans, once activated, somehow “remember” what form they had and work to restore this image upon encountering damage. The events at the mansion, compounded by the fact that Matoi’s life fibers possess unusual mutative properties, and their inclusion might as well be permanent. I’d love to know the full extent of their abilities as well as see their performance in action, if Matoi wakes up, of course.”

“*When* Ryuuko wakes up,” Mako corrected fiercely, gripping onto the blue-haired deva’s front and resolutely staring him down nose-to-nose.

“... Yes, when...” he sniffs, carefully prying Mako off the thin lab coat by the scruff of her neck. “If I may, do we have your permission to continue running these tests? By all means, you are not obliged to do so.”

Satsuki didn’t even hesitate before responding. “Please, continue your observations, as long as it does her no harm. I wish to see my sister healthy and well again, and monitoring her progress is essential.”

A quick promise to visit the beleaguered, newly-minted CEO and a quick pitstop by Aikuro to drop off the requested packet later, the student researchers left, leaving the area as monotonous and deathly still as before. With a single decisive nod from the taller of the two, the other tossed the oversized pack to the side with a wide arm sweep as it burst into loosely floating threads, doffed the ridiculously ornamented hat, and practically skipped towards the bed-bound heroine with unrestrained glee.

“I hope you wake up soon, Ryuuko-chan,” the small coconut-haired girl whispered lovingly, standing on tiptoes and placing a gentle kiss upon navy brows, sighing when no response was garnered. “It would be a shame if...” a hand reached out and cupped the delinquent’s jaw, tracing along its firm line and feeling the musculature there. “...if you didn’t want to play with us anymore.”

Scraggly chestnut moved in shimmering waves as she lifted her head once more, gazing at the no-star wistfully. In the faint crescent moonlight streaming through drawn drapes, a patch of such celestial radiance focused squarely upon their faces, reflecting off the shorter girl’s visage. And in that light a peculiar sight was beheld, for in place of an left eye, a lavishly designed violet eyepatch was placed in its stead. Nui grinned impishly, idly toying with her

soul-sister's hair and fingering tangled tresses of unruly bangs, which had grown past her shoulders and curled near the top of her breasts in her time spent asleep.

Satsuki, who was not quite Satsuki, approvingly looked on, pleased with the lack of hostility between the two of them. Poor Nui. The girl had been driven mad with the loss of her creator and who she secretly longed to call "mother", a righteous murderous rage filling her entire soul and threatening to bring about her preemptive end at the matriarch's death, with her charging straight back into the burning mansion heedless of the danger the guerrilla force posed. It was only fitting that she be subjected to the same fate she had forced upon another in order to reign her back to something resembling sanity, restrained and soul physically sewn into clothing and mind laced with foreign life fibers anew to keep her calm, docile even. A clumsy first attempt at mind-stitching by the ashen-skinned clone, intensive efforts proved fruitful when the girl shakily raised a hand, unwillingly sealing her own fate as her body betrayed her. Fingers corrected the duplicate's sloppy work to make it a permanent addition, eyepatch'd face unable to convey the magnitude of the sheer terror she experienced, frozen into a joyous smile even as bonds drew taut and choking.

With a swish of hip-length hair, she strode, soon coming to crowd the comatose girl with her presence as well. She hummed, settling at her opposite side and sitting neatly at the bed's foot. Deep emerald glittered malevolently beneath contact lenses, piercing eyes fixated intently on her fiber-sibling's deathly still form.

"I wonder," Nui giggled, hand sliding down to cup one of Ryuuko's hands and lace her fingers with the delinquent's own. "If mind stitching works on unconscious humans... If Ryuuko-chan will wake up if I..." she bent the other hand's pinky finger, letting a glowing red thread materialize out of thin air and snake a tail-end around said appendage as gear-pupiled eyes languidly followed its path, seeing and yet not quite doing so, "let this eensy-little thread burrow into her cute little skull and wrap around her brain."

Playfully, she placed the finger's tip in her mouth, chewing it in mock-consideration. Red drew close to red, the materializing fiber strand hovering dangerously close to the tiny, regrowing crimson streak the no-star possessed. And as if the girl could sense its presence already invading her own, her body shuddered, a muted whine escaping a mouth forced open by plastic tubes.

"If would be fun if Ryuuko woke up right now all wild and amazing, and slaughtered every last pig in this city! But..." she sighed, settling atop crisp white linen-laden sheets and swinging her legs over the edge of the bed. "Why can't we do it now?"

Akiko patiently smiled, watching the Grand Couturier settle for playing with the hybrid's streak with the thread instead, the girl's violent shivering instinctively intensifying at the contact. A face marred with the world's troubles became twisted and unhappy the longer dainty fibers snaked and wove through unkempt tresses, caressing each strand with a gentle touch alike that of a lover to another. Green lines signifying heartbeats soared, pulsing rapidly.

Slipping her hands through the tailor's own, she pulls them away before the nurse that would otherwise be stationed outside the viewing window to watch over her charge would rudely interrupt, lips puckering to hush her.

“Let her sleep. She has just absorbed the essences of two god robes, Lady Ragyou, and the creator themselves, after all. When the Kiryuuin’s scope of investigation has waned, we shall then call upon her once more. In fact...” a thin line quirked in a knowing smirk, “I’m certain she will be the one seeking us out as well.”

Ash-colored flesh disguised by thin layers of life fibers brushed against clammy skin, interlacing with stiffened digits. Her other hand smoothed back navy forehead hair, an approving look in her eyes when she observed the bang that was the hybrid’s pride and joy regrowing bolder, with smaller clusters of pure white ones nestled in the lengthening mane’s light-blue undersides. No rainbow strands lay within the tufts, however, for the great matriarch’s presence was all but crowded out from the others dwelling within, the almost-argentine cluster instead representing their collective appearance rather than Ragyou’s alone.

“Now that the life fibers within are fully awakened, nothing can put them to sleep ever again. She will live on as the second, the last perfect hybrid between the species, a hidden weapon in plain sight.”

“You’re so amazing, Ryuuko,” Nui whispered quietly, hungrily stealing another kiss and clamping perfectly aligned teeth upon a bruising lower lip.

Together, they perused through hundreds of pages of the student researcher’s findings, grinning wickedly when the noted signs and symptoms the bed-bound patient exhibited matched what they both were looking - and hoping! - for. The rising sun soon highlighted their figures, streams of faint yellow twinkling about their shadowed forms, the dawn of a new day in a world ignorant of its saviors and ultimate fate merely delayed. And in the first of the golden rays, pale yellow light caught the edge of shiny black as a tome’s worth of research was laid aside and a seam ripper descended upon hapless prey, biting gently into hybrid flesh.

“Lady Kiryuuin,” the director greeted the approaching heiress with a disarming grin. “It’s so good to have your presence grace us. Since we cleared the situation up about your visiting hours over the phone earlier, there’s no need to hand the guard your ID,” he added, the latter printing off a specialized ticket and handing it to her. “You can visit any time you please, don’t worry about intruding or limiting yourself to daylight hours! I just need-”

“She’s with me,” Satsuki added, and the guard lazily waved them on, already familiar with the brunette’s face and going back to boredly sweeping his view over the lobby once more. Once more giving her thanks to the director, she stepped brusquely past, focused on nothing but her goal as a sleek pair of heels carried her and her companion into the elevator and twin metal doors closed shut behind them.

She entered Ryuuko’s room, finding the scene the same as she had expected it from the long phone conversations the eldest Mankanshoku sibling bombarded her with every single day,

not a hair out of place. Sheets were crisply pressed as always, and her sister seemed otherwise untroubled by the changing world around her. She stepped forward to inspect her incapacitated sister further, stopping abruptly when her sharpened senses caught the faintest whiff of familiar perfume clinging to her skin, a medley of cloying florals and vanillas that made the bile at the back of her throat rise and the hairs along her neck bristle as long-buried memories threatened to rush to the forefront of her thoughts. Stepping beside the unconscious teen, keen eyes swept over her still form, scrutinizing every bare inch with utmost care, a gnawing suspicion eating away at the back of her mind. A hasty dart of her eyes reveals a scented wax cube sitting innocently at the teen's bedside, but the knot that twists tighter and tighter inside her knows it not true, knows this situation as the rare case in which Occam's Razor was truly and undeniably false. Gingerly, she sets her hand upon Ryuuko's, intertwining unresisting fingers with her own as her other hand gently turns the younger's face this way and that, hoping loudly in her heart that what she feared had not come to pass.

Mako for her part hopped onto the spare chair beside the reclining bed, animatedly talking to the red-streaked delinquent as if nothing had changed, quite happily recounting the events of the festivals she had attended and of the cuisine she sampled there earlier in the week after finishing school for the day - "a real school this time, one with actual books and regular uniforms and culinary clubs!" - bouncing at the edge of her seat and swinging her legs back and forth under the hard plastic surface. In between her stories, her eyes would trail over to the truckloads of get-well presents left from well-wishers, darting hands scooping them up one by one and enthusiastic speeches turned towards talking about the overabundance of people that truly cared for her, waiting for the day that she would awake. In her arms, a familiar black sailor uniform was content to lie, only springing free from her grasp to perch above his wearer's head when the former no-star started to push purchased foodstuffs under the hybrid's nose to let her breathe their aromas in, only to get hungry and end up eating them instead.

Senketsu buries himself comfortably in the rats nest of lengthening navy strands as he had done for the past several weeks, wedged between ornamental headgear distinctly belonging to his rival. As it was much too dangerous to leave a being made of pure life fibers in a post-cocoon genesis world out in the open for fear of investigational agencies seizing him for examination even with the protection of his unassuming guise of a normal school uniform, he was relegated to staying with the Mankanshokus, only being snuck into the hospital whenever Mako happily toted him along to visit Ryuuko. A feeling of deep resentment and disgust settles in his fibers, and he finds himself jealously staring at the sleek white horns, at the very notion that that *thing* is permanently part of Ryuuko now, the rabid ex-kamui leaching off her energies and happily mingling with her fibers. He settles for lying against his wearer that much closer instead, lightly pressing his cuffs against her carotid's lulling pulse and focusing on the alluring melody that was *her*, that was her *sound*, a thing he learned to treasure deeply since the first time he heard it. Her blood thrums underneath, sending a bevy of emotions running through his fibers - joy, familiarity, *relief*. Mako had offered him the blood of her father's many post-war patients as her mother before her had done whilst on the Nudist ship so many months ago, but even at his hungriest, none of them had come even close to the taste of Ryuuko's blood. Perhaps it was something woven into him when Dr. Matoi had fused her DNA into his fibers, but only her blood had tasted sweet to him, tasted as fresh as the purest of springs and rivers that overflowed with life. Satsuki's had come extremely close, being her sister, but it just wasn't the same.

“Ryuuko,” he found himself murmuring miserably into her ear, running a cuff through matted navy bangs that all but obscured half-lidded eyes. “Why won’t you wake up?”

Satsuki glances at him, her inspections finished and suspicions left inconclusive for now. Mentally pushing them aside for the moment, she silently reached over to the inattentive girl babbling on beside her and withdrew from the small pack she wore a scarlet glove with studded metal embedded over its knuckles and ebony trim that would lie over its wearer’s bones like secondary veins. The kamui seemed to perk up at the gesture, nervous fidgeting growing less restrained when the ex-dictator slipped woven cloth over her sister’s hand, careful to take heed of the needle already jabbing into her skin there. He twitches, the intimate feel of her pulse now rolling over his entire being and not just where his cuffs lay anymore, the ghost of a heart pulsing in time with his destined’s beneath knotted lapels. And as if invited by his mere proximity, she started to bleed into him once more, vague impressions of her thoughts from their tenuous connection first formed upon synchronization and solidified upon his trek into her very being dying his fabric in their colors.

He pokes her through their connection, squeezing tightly around her hand, pleased when a mild stab of irritation sluggishly runs through him in response. It is faint, distant as sun-kissed shores on lapping waves to a sailor adrift, but it fills him with excitement unbound, new hope flaring within his fibers.

Senketsu...

A flash of fire, the roaring crackle of charring wood and the hissing of vaporizing wallpaper as it curled and blackened upon sooty walls, the creaking groan of heavy timber beams as they pull free from their place far above the shattered marble tile below. The choking cloud of smoke as it roiled and writhed on the ceilings above, staining the flawless white with ashen, almost ethereal-looking smears. The melding of scenes both old and new, the image of a lab-coated man slumped against a wall fading in and out of view, wavering in and out of existence. Her horrified face reflected back at her through his glassy, unseeing eyes, blood seeping out from under his lab coat and pooling at her trainers, staining their bottoms a sickly red and weaving through channels wooden floors created.

He almost withdraws completely, her sheer unbridled terror steeping in his fibers through the bitter taste of her blood tainted and soured by medications. He shifts, phantom chills running across his fibers at the things she saw and experienced, the images almost putting him back to where he was mere weeks ago when he was forcibly melded with her consciousness for the briefest of seconds, when the border between his thoughts and hers grew indistinct and the sensation threatened to overwhelm him. But he steels himself - he’s always had when it came to situations involving *her* - and prods again, this time shifting his focus to different points on her body. Working in tandem with the bulk of himself, the glove tugs at the disordered mess her mind lay.

Ryuuko stirred at the contact, an oh so familiar Ryuuko-like frown slowly settling upon her roughened features once more. Weak, hoarse groans escaped her throat, lids twitching in vain

attempts for equally weak eyes to focus, the three at her side expectantly leaning closer in anticipation of a sudden lapse in unconsciousness, a sign that all would be well and their worries for naught when she would rise from the bed, swearing and cursing the dozen or so needles besieging her. And waited expectantly they did, until their bodies drooped slightly in defeat when realization dawned upon them once more that nothing short of a miracle would return her to them.

For now, they could only sit by her side and hope.

-2 months later-

Unlike the monotonous sea of blue and grayish-white that had dominated the landscape in the past years, the courtyard thrummed with colors. Pinks and yellows and oranges and greens dotted the landscape, banners draped over every surface possible announcing upcoming celebrations eagerly awaited by many. Students of all star-rankings and ages intermingled without care, busying themselves with updating each other on current life events and trading plans on their future prospects. For on this day, none of traditional barriers regarding social construct mattered. Buildings were freshly repainted, decorated with well-wishing posters and celebratory decorations as a swarm of construction workers moved about like ants, cooperating in ordered disarray between lumbering machinery's low roars and metal welders' hisses.

And at the very apex of the academy and far away from everyone else, Satsuki Kiryuuin was beside herself. As always, the loyal butler stood beside his charge, back straight and posture perfect, a silver serving tray decorated with a fresh steaming cup of tea and a porcelain teapot balanced atop a splayed hand.

"More tea, miss," Soroi bowed, deferentially handing his charge the fine china, which she took with the grace afforded to her by her stiff upbringing.

"Thank you,"

The fine clinking of ceramic, and all was silent once more, the two looking past floor-to-ceiling windows to gaze at her kingdom below.

Her gaze flitted to him, years of familiarity making it child's play to discern his intents behind the stoic facade his duty made him adopt. "You of all people should know that I value your judgement. Speak," she added warmly, the sharp edges of her eyes turning softer, "and do not trouble yourself with such trivial worries."

"Retaining Honnouji Academy's services past their initial purpose, Lady Satsuki? It seems... highly sentimental of you."

Taking a drink, she reclined slightly in her chair, dots of blue drifting down to the deep, still waters of the bitter beverage below, where she considered his question pensively. “Yes. With the war against the life fibers over, it should serve no purpose and thus would be slated for destruction as soon as conveniently possible. However, with the knowledge that Rei, my clonal counterpart, and Nui - all highly proficient users of life fibers - are still active, I will allow it to remain for a time. The destruction of the primordial life fiber and the prior use of Absolute Domination to nullify the life fiber cocoon sphere genesis may have severely limited their abilities, but it is best that we keep an eye out for them, as Absolute Domination only destroyed life fibers that have already consumed their wearers and not the fiber stores themselves. Our search may not have turned up anything of value regarding their survival yet, but we cannot afford to be lax in our surveillance.”

“And stepping down from the student council but remaining as its new director?”

“Ah,” she turned her gaze back to the windows overlooking the entire academy, nodding decisively after the briefest of moments. “The devas, the senior student body... they deserve a chance. A future. Today, I too will graduate from Honnouji Academy and leave it in the capable hands of those who will come after me. But this institution is by no means something that I can completely leave behind, at least, not yet. I - we - may be free of this Kiryuuin curse, but it does not absolve us from the consequences that follow regardless of the outcome.”

He nodded in understanding, moving to speak once more when a loud blare of trumpets preemptively cut him off. The student body roared their excitement, joyous voices intertwining with blaring music as the first notes of Honnouji’s elite band began to play.

Crinkling his eyes in contentment, dry lips quirked into a genuine smile. “It’s time, miss,”

“So it is,” she acknowledged quietly, rising from her chair and placing the delicate cup back onto the silver tray.

Stepping forth into the light, she was greeted by overwhelming cheers that intensified to a deafening crescendo upon spotting their leader. The early March morning tousled her bangs, the sun forming a brilliant, magnificent halo about her head as it had done so many times before. And in the center of the entire mass lying below her pedestal, a group of familiar faces stood out. Easily outshining thousands of others, their presence somehow intensified upon sighting her, spirited cries easily reaching her ears despite her position atop Honnouji’s peak. Pink and blue, red and brown, yellow and green and orange - all elicited strong feelings and fond memories within her heart.

Stepping forward and, with a distinct lack of a commanding *click* of high heels, she seized the microphone, voice steady and strong as always.

“My fellow students, it is with great honor that I, as your student council president and valedictorian, induct the Senior Class as Honnouji Academy graduates on this very day!”

Mako happily sang along to a song quietly playing over the radio as she slipped on a blouse, an honest-to-god piece of clothing that wasn't a hand-me-down, salvaged from thrift shops, or riddled with holes. Brushing newly-shed dog hairs off her teal skirt, she did a small twirl in front of the mirror, pleased when its edges did little flips.

Padding lightly on wooden floors both old and new, she raised cupped hands to her mouth, as one would do with a bullhorn, and sucked in a huge lungful of air. "Ryuuko! Hurry up! She's going to be coming any minute now!"

She heard the heavy *thunk* of porcelain against wood, the hurried clatter of metal silverware being set aside and inadvertently sent skittering across freshly-swept linoleum flooring. Feet padded against stone tiling, familiar sounds of hangars falling over and being knocked about and even more familiar frustrated muttered swears reaching her ear soon afterward.

"Ah! Coming, coming!"

Practically vibrating with energy and unable to wait much longer, she darted toward her first, best friend, neatly ducking as the last of shed sleepwear went flying overhead. Beaming sunnily as her head poked through a familiar navy collar and frantic hands adjusted the skirt, she fetched an ornate sukajan from the new wooden drawer, helping her arms through the sleeves.

Adjusting the zipper, she hummed, pleased at how it instantly made her skin a degree warmer. "Hey Mako, why don't we get going?" Ryuuko said, only to find an empty room before her. "Hey... Mako...?"

The brunette stood atop the armchair, carefully balancing herself on the furniture by bracing against Ryuuko's head, a plethora of fronds grasped in her hands and a hint of tongue peeking out between her lips as she worked with complete focus. " - and some cute accessories to go with - "

Feeling the delicate points atop her head explode with sensation, she instinctively jerked back, unintentionally yanking her best friend off the chair and hurtling towards the floor. "Whoa, Mako, hey!"

Ryuuko moved the second she came into view, seizing her hand and lacing soft fingers with calloused ones. Wrapping an arm around her body as the hybrid pulled her back up and pressed hers against her own, Mako gaped, thoroughly impressed.

"Whoa, hey, you caught me!"

"Ya gotta warn me before you do that," she halfheartedly chides, shifting the girl's weight to better hold her.

"Look!" Mako beams, and twin pools of carmine trail up to where her eager finger points to in the mirror.

Comfortably nestled atop her shaggy mane, a pre-made matrix of vines and flowers, with the odd frond here and there serving as accent pieces. She blinked, turning her head this way and that, realization slowly dawning upon her how they all but obscured her horns - a particularly sensitive subject for her, as with anything related to the last days of the war - with their presence.

“Thanks, Mako.”

-0-

“Dad says you’ve been having night terrors,” Mako says to her one day when it’s just the two of them on a bench outside the hospital, when the nurses allowed Ryuuko a few brief moments outside the unchanging world of the hospital room. “That you’ve been having them for the past couple of nights,” she adds, swinging her legs over the wooden edge and scraping newly-purchased heels against the cement, tone and inflection nonchalant, like how one would remark on the weather.

Ryuuko flinches, turning away from her adoptive sister’s knowing gaze. Glancing at the melting kakagouri between them and cursing her weakened body for being unable to do such a simple thing like picking up a spoon and avoiding the question with a mouthful of flavored ice, she feigns a reassuring smile. “They’re just nightmares, Mako. Everybody has them.”

“Dad says you’ve woken up patients with your shouting every time it happens,” she counters gently, taking a slow lap of her syrup-laden spoon as the blue-haired girl turns toward her in horror. “He says sometimes you start awake and don’t go back to sleep until noon.”

“...!”

“I can’t leave Senketsu here,” she remarks when Ryuuko fails to offer up anything but a slack jawed expression, “and mom was washing him today so he couldn’t come, but I bet he would know how to cheer you up.”

A short grumble. And then silence, silence that stretched on for minutes on end.

*In a much lower tone than she intended, Ryuuko cautiously murmurs her reply, “I don’t... remember much about what happened after I woke up and left Senketsu behind... that day in Osaka... It’s getting harder to remember,” her fidgeting starts, increases, the hem of her hospital gown soon raked into loose fibers by lengthening nails. “Sometimes, I can’t even tell which memories are **mine** and which ones are the ones that the **bitch** made me remember, because they both look true. Sometimes, I wish I don’t remember anything at all, just so that I don’t dream about her putting that thing onto me, of her **touching** me with those filthy fingers of hers every night!*

*And to top it off, I can’t walk! I needed to go to therapy to learn how to crawl. **Crawl**, Mako! I can’t even do things like get up from bed without help, or pick up that spoon and eat without*

*my hand suddenly getting tired and making me drop it! I can't even leave. I had to basically threaten the nurses here to let me out and just **sit outside**. I'm driving myself crazy, and there isn't anything I can do about it.*

*Sometimes, I wonder if I actually did those things when Junketsu was stitched onto me..." her mouth turns down into an ugly snarl, teeth bared, "Sometimes, I dream of **her**, Ragyou, of life with that bitch as my mother, after she fucked with my head and put happy memories of us together... Sometimes," her voice drops, barely louder than a whisper, "sometimes I catch myself regretting that she died. Sometimes I think that if I didn't **kill** her, we could have been happy somehow. That she wouldn't have been crazy anymore.*

*I don't want to go back to being **her** puppet. At all. Not after all that happened. But with those damn memories she implanted in me, I can't help but think about them, even though I know she's **nothing** like that disgustingly sweet person she made herself out to be in them."*

Mako stays silent, unable to find the words to comfort her friend. Instead, she extends a hand, offering her presence as a stand-in.

Ryuuko gratefully surrounds it with her shaking ones, both of them trembling as they cupped hers in a warm, gentle cradle, "Thanks, Mako," she quieted out, the tight knot inside her unwinding the slightest bit as she rubbed circles on her knuckles with the pad of a thumb.

Mako beams at her in that special way of hers, the way that makes her feel like everything will be all right, and Ryuuko catches her heart skipping a beat as something warm floods it.

Hope.

It stays with her throughout the day as Mako loyally remains by her side, taking in whatever pains Ryuuko offered selflessly, staying with her well into the night even when the Nudist doctor came into her room and gave her medicines that caused her to pass out soon afterward.

-0-

The doorbell rang, the clear chime of metal bells easily reverberating throughout the tiny household.

"Ah! That's Lad- I mean, that's Satsuki!"

A rush of wind, and Mako was gone, leaping off of her and darting through the doorway before Ryuuko could respond. Now alone once again, she gave herself a once over in front of

the full-length mirrors hanging on wooden drawer doors, where a freshly washed and ironed Senketsu had hung on a slim metal hanger only moments ago.

“I still find it strange that with the life fibers defeated, you still choose to wear me. You can now wear other clothing, clothing... much *cuter* than I,” he finished lamely, slightly drooping at the thought of his bonded, *his wearer* , finally outgrowing him.

“As if I’d feel comfortable wearing something other than you, you silly uniform,” she chided, pulling at his lapels teasingly. “I’ll wear you even when I’m old and gray and you’re still the same kinky sailor outfit.”

Her hand swept over her body in a bit to smooth out the jacket’s wrinkles, unconsciously brushing against the barest space between skin and clothing. The hem caught as it rose, revealing white kamui-borne additions Nudist Beach had yet to find a way to remove without instant regrowth replacing lost tissue and bone that had only grew more prominent as the days passed. Instantly, her bright smile slipped on her face, expression twisting into something wistful, something lost, gaze focusing especially on the unnaturally white-dyed patches of hair her bangs chose to take.

Senketsu picked up on her sudden change in mood, supportively squeezing around her in what she easily interpreted as a hug. “I believe the human term for this is ‘maturity.’ ‘Growth.’ ‘A period of bodily changes and development.’ You may be experiencing another form of it with your awakened life fibers, as am I. Both of us take very different paths with this new experience, but it is a shared experience all the same.”

His wearer snorted derisively, confident demeanor restored with an indignant huff. “You’re saying I hit puberty again!? Are you kidding me!? I thought I was only supposed to go through this crap once!”

“It is best not to worry too much,” he reasoned, “It’s not within our ability to control yet, so there isn’t much use preoccupying ourselves about it. If it helps, I don’t detect anything unusual from your blood, and your personality hasn’t changed much. In fact, it’s improved since you’ve been released from the hospital.”

She paused for a moment, considering his words. “Yeah,” she finally concluded, pursing her lips. “I guess it isn’t something I *can* change. And I’ll have you, Satsuki, and that pervert in case I start developing... something...”

“Ah,” he murmured his assent, still snugly wrapping himself around her.

“Hello, Mako,” she heard her sister distantly say, tell-tale clicks of low-set heels against foyer wood as Satsuki respectfully doffed her shoes the only indication that she had even come in.

“We should continue getting ready,” Senketsu quietly urged after a moment’s pause. “Mako will be coming back soon.”

“Yeah,” she responded, hopping over to where a small dresser drawer sat in the corner of the room. “I know.”

Letting the double security doors close behind her, she ducked into a nearby room, spotting her sister fiddling with a plastic cup as she sat at the hospital bed's edge. Her gown was splattered with damp spots, tan hospital tiling suffering the same fate. And quite possibly (most definitely, she reminded herself) for the first time, she saw her with an expression of complete loss. The harsh red highlights that marked her consumption by the rogue kamui had long faded from around her eyes, but deep shadows replaced them with bags beginning to show underneath her lids.

Careful not to disturb her too much, she slid into place at her side, legs automatically coming up to cross at the knees. Ryuuko seemed to start at the sudden movement, the nail making light grooves into the curled mouth momentarily pausing when the bed shifted and jostled unexpectedly. She looked over at her sister in muted shock, then at the cloth-wrapped pack she neatly placed atop her lap, ignorant of the way she examined her with a critical eye as if she were a jeweler carefully appraising a diamond.

Turning away disinterestedly after a brief moment and returning her attention to the cheap plastic vessel, she mumbled, "M'not hungry. Mako came with croquettes."

'And fed me, and washed me, and helped me walk whenever I needed to use the bathroom' the unspoken words lingered in the space between them, lack of embarrassment on part of the younger at such intimate actions deftly speaking volumes by her sibling.

A sudden thought seized her then, a pull that could only be described as instinctive, magnetic. The nigh-irresistible will to get closer to the red-streaked delinquent, to touch her, to somehow make up for the months of bonding the two had spent as foster siblings within the precious few minutes they would get to spend together in this tiny room today. She knew it was a foolish thing to feel - a highly illogical one at that given the circumstances! - but she couldn't help the distinctly human feeling from rising like bile in her throat.

Envy.

*And in that moment, she felt a stab of irritation at the company for taking up so much of her time and stealing every minute she was available from seeing her little sister when she needed it most, when she was **not** one of the heroes who put a stop to the life fiber invasion, when she was **not** just a 'freaky life-fiber hybrid' that could probably bend steel I-beams into a pretzel knot if she felt like it. Long-forgotten thoughts rose to the forefront of her mind, childhood daydreams of life coloring her idle fantasies with a little sister living with her, growing up as someone more than a body to look after, a fellow-in-arms who she would*

protect against Ragyou's corrupting influence while plotting her death at her side. She wanted to be the big sister she had dreamed of being for so long.

She knew it was selfish, that if fate had played out with Ragyou learning of Ryuuko's existence in any way and sinking her claws into her before she was capable of developing an individuality of her own, the Earth would have been firmly slated to become the next cocoon genesis planet.

But still, the thoughts persisted.

Eventually, she managed to shake herself out of her trance and give her a slight nod, putting the homemade bento onto the adjustable bedside table. "Ah. Mako's told me you've made progress with physical therapy. I take it that it's going well."

"Mmh," Ryuuko grunted, shooting a glare at the pair of metal crutches lying against a faux-leather chair.

They sat in silence as stiff wooden hands on the wall clock slowly drifted past engraved numerals, respectively staring at the floor or at their long-lost sister. Minutes ticked by, Ryuuko's swinging legs rhythmically tapping against the plastic and metal railings and the space between her furrowed brows growing smaller with every passing second. Finally, after what seemed like forever, she spoke, sleep-heavy voice masked by irritation.

"If you're waiting for Inumuta or Iori, you're outta luck. They left about an hour ago. Maybe two."

"I know."

"Then what?" she asked tiredly, limply raising a hand to rub at an eye. "It ain't like you to visit unless you want something."

Satsuki retrieved a metal thermos from the canvas shoulder bag now curled at her side, tipping some of its contents into its rounded cover. "I came here to talk. To apologize, if you would allow me."

"Look, if it's about the whole 'congrats, you're actually sisters!' and the 'sicking my entire army of batcrap-crazy weirdos on you for the past couple of months' thing, you don't have to do that. I don't think ya could've known about it even if you did dig into my background. Believe me, dad made sure."

"It's not that," she cut in, "Although I'm glad you share my feelings regarding the matter."

Ryuuko stared, the raised hand slowly drifting back down until it collided against the bedspread with a light thump. Taking her silence as permission, she continued, carefully replacing her sister's forgotten plastic cup with the capful of tea.

"Believe me, if there was another way to choose the course of the future without further burdening you after all you've been through, especially at such a delicate time, I would. But I can not honestly leave the matter to a democratically elected group of strangers who have no

experience in what we've seen and participated in, no matter how fair the election - I cannot have a executive branch that is unable to see the gravity of the situation at hand and act appropriately. You already know of the dangers the life fibers still pose to the world, especially with three of her most adept followers still active, as well as the capability of Honnouji Academy's student body. Therefore, the only course moving forward is nepotism. I now ask you this, Ryuuko, as both your sister, the soon-to-be director of Honnouji Academy, as well as a fellow member of Nudist Beach: 'how do you feel about becoming Honnouji Academy's new student council president?'"

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Satsuki looked around the tight house, a glorified shack barely larger than the ones in the slum they left behind upon its reconstruction. To her left lay an annex, a hastily-constructed doorway leading to the 'kinda-sorta not-back alley doctor's clinic!' dragged from Honnouji's no-star neighborhood. She took a moment to absorb her surroundings as she casually strode down the short hall, noting that even without the typical makings of a family household - neat and almost-barren bedrooms, excessively fancy decorations specifically for visitors' eyes, stiffly-postured group pictures, and all -, the cramped space felt infinitely more welcoming than the cavernous empty mansions that marked her life thus far. Rather than a stark, eggshell white, the walls were painted a warm yellow, modest wooden trim replacing opulent jade and gold ones. The greasy scent of freshly cooked croquettes filled her nose, hearty stews and slow-cooked meat driving away memories of endless rooms perfumed the same sickeningly flowery odor.

Turning the corner, she entered the small den that Ryuuko declared her and Mako's room, smiling at her little sister - although, she couldn't really be called "little" anymore, it seemed. With the resolution of the life fiber crisis and subsequent slow awakening from an unexpected coma, it seemed that their height difference had switched. She lifted her head from where she leaned against a wall to stuff a foot into a sock, rising as best as she could to greet her older sister.

"Ryuuko."

"Sats- ," she stopped abruptly, immediately correcting herself with a small shake of her head. "I mean, sis."

She patiently exhaled, although she couldn't help the tiniest of smiles from escaping from her, "I told you, Ryuuko, you don't have to force a sisterly bond for me. Not for my sake."

"Nah," she joked goodnaturedly, shifting to rest against her crutch as a small, mischievous smile flitted across her face, "I don't think it's that - forcing a bond and shit. I'm pretty sure it's more of a consequence of shouting your name before swinging my sword atcha."

"I see. Hello, Senketsu," Satsuki greeted, taking notice of the black kamui as he settled happily atop Ryuuko's skin.

“Good morning, Satsuki,” Senketsu replied, his voice coming in stronger and ringing out clearer than ever.

Without preamble, Ryuuko leaned toward her and lifted the freshly-cut strands with her free hand. Inspecting their shorn ends, she gave a low whistle in appreciation at Bakuzan’s work.

“Neat lines. No ragged ends. Still as sharp as ever... Hell of a speech you gave the other day, sis.”

“I was very grateful that you were able to attend, Ryuuko. Hopefully, it was not too much trouble for you.”

The hand slipped from ebony tresses, waving dismissively. “Nah, don’t worry about it, it’s fine. I was gonna go anyway with Mako even if you didn’t say something about; I promised to get her some ice cream mochi afterward from the new store that opened up in the next town over.”

She paused, considering, a tongue shyly poking from the corner of her mouth as she looked upon the neatly-combed strands thoughtfully. Lifting the shaking hand once more, she placed it upon the well-groomed mass of hair and with quick, jerky movements thoroughly tousled its top and sides.

“Ah, Ryuuko!”

“There!” she declared triumphantly, taking a small hop back to fully appreciate her work. “Now we look alike!”

“Now we look...” she trailed off, watching as Ryuuko motioned to the full-sized mirror beside them with a small bob of her head and slowly brought her bangs together to imitate the triangular shape her sister’s possessed. “Ah.”

“It looks better on you, though,” she shrugged, making the most ridiculous expressions in the mirror in an attempt to recreate the famous Kiryuuin Satsuki scowl. “I don’t think I have the, uh, face to pull it off.”

“Hm. I see.”

Catching her stare, she craned her neck over to look back quizzically. “What?”

“That jacket suits you.”

“The jacket...?” she mouthed, as if just realizing its presence. “Huh? Oh, yeah! Mako picked it when we went to the market the other day. She said something about getting new clothes to commemorate our new life, or something like that.”

She hummed, gaze finally shifting onto an intricately tied bow resting on the small of her back, just above the jacket’s hem and partially snagged on the delicately curving vertebral protrusions. They looked almost like silk, individual threads shimmering in the light. But she knew their origin was far from Earthly, for their the faint reddish glow that would be dismissed as lighting effects by the untrained eye was wholly alien in appearance. Ryuuko

gave a startled hop away when her fingers brushed against a trailing end, the bundle of threaded ribbons squirming animatedly.

“O-oi!”

The hand retreated, Satsuki’s face pulling into a frown as she watched the mass slowly settle back into a shapeless bundle. “My apologies. I wasn’t aware that tactile sensations cause them pain.”

“N-No,” Ryuuko stutters, still absolutely weirded out by the feeling of them moving without her direct input, their touch like a thousand feather dusters lightly brushing against her skin. “They’re just really, *really* sensitive.”

“I take it leaving them in this form is preferable, even if they’re exposed to outside stimuli?”

The younger rubbed the back of her head with a hand. “Yeah. Just until I figure out how to put them away. Haven’t an idea how to do that, though. Tried everything, too. Used belts, asked Senketsu about them, threatened to trim them with the scissors, had Mako jump on my back to try to force them in. Everything. Still didn’t work. So they’re here. Just making me trip over them until I finally stop being lazy and tie them into a loose knot, I guess.”

“We can always ask Houka and Shiro at your next checkup. I doubt the restaurant is the appropriate setting to find a conclusive answer.”

“Yeah, I - ”

A sudden pounding of feet cuts her off, a blur of brown and flowing yellow nearly bowling them over. “Come on, Ryuuko,” Mako chirped, enthusiastically tugging her friend and sibling (and her sibling’s sibling) through the house and into the early afternoon sun. “They’re gonna be there before us!”

“Tch. Knowing those four, they’re probably been there for an hour already,” Ryuuko groaned, squinting as rays of light struck her square in her eyes, her crutch and awkward gait (one foot forward, the other foot dragging to stand beside its twin before moving on) making it difficult to maneuver over the threshold. “They’re weird like that.”

“Hm. They’ve always been known to be fastidious in any task I’ve given them over the years, no matter how menial.” Satsuki hummed, neatly yanking both hers and Ryuuko’s shoes from the foyer before Mako slammed the door shut and placing them onto their respective owners’ feet.

“Yeah, I gotta teach them how to loosen up a bit.” Turning back to Mako, she motioned her on with a jerk of her head. “Locked it?”

“Yup!”

And with that, the three of them started their trek into the city. Side by side, they walked, moving down the road at a sedate pace. They talked and laughed about things long passed, Ryuuko soon challenging them to a race and somehow managing to keep pace with Mako

despite her recovering state. Wrapped around her body as her heart pounded a mile a minute and hugging her gently as the Mankanshoku household grew smaller and further away, Senketsu securely curled about, warm about her shoulders.

劇終

The End

Chapter End Notes

For the dedicated, DTR's story ends when yours begins, making a perfect cycle. Ouruoboros.

And on this day (April 15, 2017), DTR is finished. I am free.

I can finally retire from the KKK fandom.

So... bye.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!